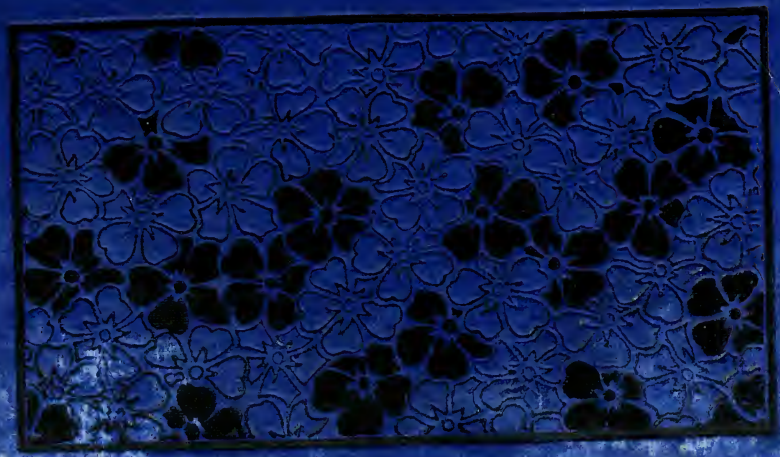

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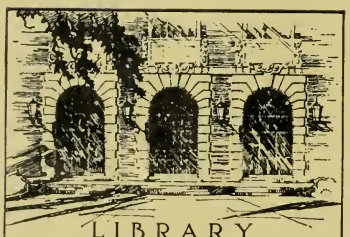

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A MERE CHANCE.

A NOVEL.

BY

ADA CAMBRIDGE,

AUTHOR OF "IN TWO YEARS TIME," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,
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A MERE CHANCE.

CHAPTER I.

ANOTHER RASH PROMISE.

MR. KINGSTON, as soon as he received Mrs. Thornley's invitation, sent a telegram to her nearest post-town, to tell her he would start for Adelonga on the following day, and await at the inn where he left the railway the buggy she was kind enough to say should be sent to meet him.

There was much amusement at

Adelonga over this unwonted promptitude on the part of an idle and self-indulgent man, who had never been known to hurry himself, or to go into the country willingly; and Rachel was teased in fun and congratulated in earnest on the strong hold she had gained upon his erewhile erratic affections.

The buggy was ordered at once—Mr. Thornley's own pet Abbott buggy, that floated over the rough roads—and a pet pair of horses were harnessed into it, and another pair sent forward to change with them on the way, and Mr. Thornley himself set forth to meet his guest.

Next day Lucilla ordered one of her best rooms—usually reserved for married ladies — to be prepared for him, and had great consultations with

her cook on his behalf; and at about five in the afternoon he arrived, wrapped in a fur-collared overcoat, like a traveller in bleak and barren regions, and had a royal welcome.

Lucilla, followed by her mother, went out to the verandah to meet her old friend—though, indeed, she never willingly omitted that graceful act of hospitality, whoever might be her guest—and was delighted to receive again the same old compliment on her charming appearance that had pleasantly befooled her in her maiden days. Mrs. Hardy was likewise greeted with effusion, and responded cordially; and then they all looked round.

"Where is Rachel?" inquired Mr. Kingston, with anxious solicitude; "isn't she well?"

Rachel was found in the drawing-room, nervously re-arranging the cups and saucers that had just been brought in for tea. Lucilla ushered him in with a smile, and discreetly retired with her mother, upon some utterly unnecessary errand.

The lovers met in the middle of the room, and Rachel went through the ordeal that she had been vaguely dreading all day. It was worse than she had expected, for she felt, by some subtle, newly-developed sense, that she had been greatly missed and ardently longed for, and that they were truly lover's arms that folded her, trembling and shrinking, in that apparently interminable embrace.

She had not yet come to realise the magnitude and the ignominy of the wrong that she was doing him, but a

pang of remorseful pity did hurt her somewhere, through all her stony irresponsiveness, for the fate that had driven him, the desired of so many women, to set his heart at last upon one who did not want it.

For a brief intolerable moment she felt that she had it in her to implore him to release her from her engagement, but — well, she was a little coward, if the truth must be told.

And, moreover, she had not quite come to the point of giving up her pink boudoir, and her diamond necklace, and all her other splendid possessions in prospect, because she could not love the contingent husband as was her duty to him to do.

She did not know as yet that she loved another man.

"And you never came to meet me?" said Mr. Kingston, with tender reproach, as he led her by one reluctant hand to a sofa that was wheeled up comfortably to the fireside. "And I was straining my eyes all across the paddock, to see you on the verandah looking out."

"I was looking out," said Rachel; "I saw the buggy before it reached the woolshed. But——"

"But you thought it would be nicer to have our meeting here, with no one to look on? So it is, darling; you were quite right. I could not have helped kissing you, if all the servants on the place had been standing round; and one doesn't like to make a public exhibition of one's self. Oh, my pet, I *am* so glad to get you again! And how are you? Let me have a good look at you.

Oh, if you are going to blush, how am I to tell whether you are looking well or not?"

"I am not going to blush," said Rachel; "and I am quite well. I never was better. The country air is doing me ever so much good."

"I am not so sure of that," rejoined Mr. Kingston, rather gravely, stroking her soft cheek. "You look fagged, as if you had been knocking about too much. I didn't like your going to those rubbishy little races—I told Thornley so. Have you been sitting up late at night?"

"No—I have been doing *nothing*," pleaded Rachel; "I am really as well as possible. How is the house getting on?"

"The house is not doing much at present. They are still pottering at the

foundations, which seem to take a frightful lot of doing to. Not that they have had time to make much progress since you were there—it is not much over a fortnight yet, you know. Oh, but it has been a long fortnight! Rachel, now I have got you, I don't mean to lose sight of you again."

"How did you leave Beatrice?" inquired Rachel, hastily.

"Beatrice is quite well—as sprightly as ever. I told her I meant to bring you back to town, by force of arms if necessary, and she said I was quite right. We can't do without you in Melbourne—I can't, anyhow; and what's more, I don't mean to try."

"How is Uncle Hardy?"

"Uncle Hardy? I'm sure I don't know—I was very nearly saying I don't

care. Of course he is quite well; he always is, I believe. Is there anybody else you are particularly anxious about, Mademoiselle ?"

"Yes," said Rachel, smiling and blushing; "I am anxious about Black Agnes. How is my dear Black Agnes? *Does* William attend to her properly?"

"I don't leave her to William," said Mr. Kingston. "I have taken her away to my own stables. And there she is eating her head off—wanting you, like the rest of us. If you have no more questions to ask, I'll begin; may I? I have some *really* important inquiries to make."

Rachel gasped. But to her immense relief Lucilla was heard approaching, talking at an unnecessarily high pitch of voice to her mother, who responded with

equal vigour; and the two ladies entered, followed by Mr. Thornley, all wearing a more or less deprecatory aspect.

The men and the matrons grouped themselves round the fire, and plunged into an animated discussion of the latest Melbourne news. Rachel poured out the tea, and insisted on carrying it round to everybody, regardless of polite protests; which charmed her lover very much.

He was rather cold, and a little stiff and tired after his unwonted exertion; his seat was soft and restful; and he liked to see the slender creature gliding about, with her sweet face and her deft hands, and picture to himself with what meek dutifulness she would serve her lord and master when the time came.

Rachel hoped they were in for a

pleasant gossip till dinner time, but she was much mistaken.

"I must go and see after my baby, Mr. Kingston, if you will excuse me," said Lucilla at the end of half-an-hour, setting down her empty but still smoking teacup, and rising with an air that implied a pressing duty postponed to the very last moment. Mr. Kingston expressed an ardent desire to make the baby's acquaintance, which flattered the young mother greatly, but otherwise led to nothing. Lucilla went out, promising to introduce her son under favourable auspices in the morning; and as she disappeared, Mrs. Hardy jumped up and followed her with apparently anxious haste.

"Oh, Lucilla, I *quite* forgot that aconite for Dolly's cold!" she ex-

claimed; "shall I come and look for it now?"

Mr. Thornley, left behind, stood on the hearthrug, shifting uneasily from one leg to the other. He cleared his throat, remarked that the days were lengthening wonderfully, moved some ornaments on the chimney-piece, and looked at his watch.

"Dear me," he muttered briskly, as if struck with a sudden thought, "a quarter to six, I do declare! Excuse me a few minutes, Kingston."

"Certainly," replied Mr. Kingston. And then *he* went out.

"How stupid they are!" cried poor Rachel to herself, almost stamping her foot with vexation. But there was no help for it. The affianced couple were once more left to themselves—as affianced

couples should be, and should like to be —in the pleasant firelight and no less pleasant twilight shadows that were filling the quiet room.

Mr. Kingston rose, took his reluctant sweetheart's hand, and led her back to the sofa by the hearth.

"What time do they have dinner here?" he asked.

"Seven o'clock," said Rachel, with a sinking heart.

"Then we shall have nearly an hour to ourselves, shan't we? Come then, and let us have a good long talk. But first, I've got something for you."

He began to fumble in his pockets, and presently drew forth a little square packet, neatly sealed up in paper, which he laid on Rachel's knee. Wise

man! he had not had his long and varied experiences for nothing.

The girl in smiling perplexity turned the mysterious parcel over and over, broke first one seal and then another with much delicate elaboration; cautiously stripped off the paper wrappings, and revealed, as she expected, a morocco jewel-case.

"Oh, how kind!" she murmured, stroking it caressingly with her white fingers.

"Open it before you say that," said he; "you don't know that there is anything in it yet."

"Ah, but I know your ways," she rejoined; "I know it is sure to be something lovely." And then she lifted the lid, and exclaimed "O-o-oh!" with a long breath. There lay, on a bed of

blue velvet, a beautiful little watch, thickly set on one side of the case with tiny diamond sparks, which on examination proved to illuminate the flourishes of a big R; and a chain of proportionate value was coiled around it.

Rachel was in ecstacies. She had longed for a watch all her life, and had never yet had one, except an old silver warming-pan of her father's, which would not go into a lady's pocket.

It was only lately that Mr. Kingston had discovered this fact; and he had immediately had one prepared for her, such as he considered would be worthy of her future position in society, and of his own reputation for good taste. He felt himself well repaid for his

outlay at this moment. Of her own accord she put up her soft lips and kissed him, pouring out her childish gratitude for his thoughtfulness, and his kindness, and his goodness, in broken exclamations which were charmingly naïve and sweet.

"You are always giving me things," she murmured, shyly stroking his coat sleeve.

"Dear little woman!" he responded, with ardent embraces, from which she did not shrink—at least, not much; "it is my greatest pleasure in life to give you things."

And from this substantial base of operations the astute lover opened the campaign which was to deliver her, a helpless captive, into his hands.

"And now," he said, when the watch having been consigned to its pocket in her pretty homespun gown, and the chain artistically festooned from a button-hole at her waist, a suggestive silence fell upon them—"now I want to know what you mean by saying you won't be married till next year? Naughty child, you made me very miserable with that letter. Though to be sure it was better than the other one, which was so horribly, so really brutally, cold that I had to go to the fire to get warm after reading it. Oh, Rachel, you are not *half* in love yet, I fear!"

"Don't say that," she murmured, with tender compunction.

"And I believe that is why you wish to put off our marriage."

"Oh, don't say that!" she repeated, weakly anxious to re-assure and conciliate him, and to postpone unpleasantness—woman-like, afraid of the very opportunity that she wanted when she saw herself unexpectedly confronted with it. "I don't wish to put it off—only for a little while."

"Do you call till next year a little while? Because I don't."

"Of course it is. Why, here is August!"

"And there are five long months—double the time we have been engaged already. And it wouldn't be comfortable to be travelling in the hot season."

"You said spring would be a nice time," suggested Rachel. She was touching his sleeve with timid, depre-

catory caresses, and she was desperately frightened and anxious.

"Yes; *this* spring—not twelve months hence. Oh, my pet, *do* let it be this spring. There are three lovely months before us, and I should like to get that Sydney house. I have the offer of it still for a few days; I got them to keep it open till I could consult you. You *must* remember that I am not as young as you are, Rachel; a year one way or the other may be of no account to you, but it is of very great importance to me."

There was a touch of impatience and irritation in his voice, which helped her to pluck up courage to cling to her resolve.

At the same time she heard the soft ticking of that precious watch at her

side; her heart was touched and warmed by what she called his "kindness;" and she was anxious to do anything that she *could* do to please him.

"Won't it do when the house is built?" she asked, in a wheedling, cowardly, coaxing tone, as she laid her cheek for a moment on his shoulder. "I will come back to Melbourne as soon as you like—I can stay with Beatrice, if aunt likes to remain here. We can be together almost as if we were married. We can ride together every day, and watch how the house goes on; and you know aunt doesn't mind *how* much you are with us at Toorak. Only if you would consent to put off the wedding till then—"

"Will you promise to marry me then?" he asked quickly.

"Yes, I will, really," she replied, without any hesitation, thankful for the reprieve, which she had been by no means sure of getting.

"As soon as the house is built?"

"As soon as the house is finished."

"No—not finished; that mayn't be next year, nor the year after. As soon as the roof is on?"

Rachel paused.

"How long does that take?"

"Oh, a long time—ever so long."

She paused again, with a longer pause. And then,

"Very well," she sighed, resignedly.

"It is a bargain? You promise faithfully? On your solemn word of honour?"

"Oh, don't make such a terrible thing of it!" she protested, with a rather

hysterical laugh, that showed signs of degenerating into a whimper. "I *can* only say I will."

"And that is enough, my sweet. I wont't require you to reduce it to writing. Your word shall be your bond. It is a long while to wait, but I must try to be patient. At any rate, it is a comfort to be done with uncertainty, and to have a fixed time to arrange for. And now, perhaps, we ought to go and dress. Tell me how much it wants to seven, Rachel; you have the correct Melbourne time."

CHAPTER II.

THE BEGINNING OF TROUBLES.

IT was in the afternoon that Lucilla again expected her guests, on the day of the ball given at Adelonga in honour of the coming of age of her absent step-son; and the hospitable arrangements characteristic of bush households on such occasions, were made for their reception on the usual Adelonga scale. All the visitors were to be "put up" of course; and from the exhaustless

piles of material stowed away in the ample store-rooms, bed-rooms were improvised in every hole and corner, and beds made up wherever beds could decently go—in the store-rooms themselves, in the school-room, in the laundry, in the gardener's cottage, as well as in the numerous guest-chambers with which this, in common with other Australian "country seats," was regularly supplied.

Bright log fires burned on every hearth; bright spring flowers adorned all the ladies' dressing-tables; stupendous viands piled the pantry shelves and filled the spacious kitchens with delectable odours.

Servants bustled about with a festive air.

Mr. Thornley, in shirt sleeves, brought

forth treasures from the remote recesses of his cellar that no one but he was competent to meddle with.

Mrs. Thornley moved complacently about her extensive domain, regulating all these exceptional arrangements with that housewifely good sense and judgment which distinguished all Mrs. Hardy's daughters.

Rachel found her sphere of action in the ball-room, where with Miss O'Hara and the children, a young gardener to supply material, the station carpenter to do the rough work, and Mr. Kingston to look on and criticise from an arm-chair by the fire, she worked all day at the decorations, which had been designed in committee and partly prepared the day before. The great Japanese screens had been carried away

(to be made very useful in the construction of bed and bath-rooms) and the carpets taken up; and now she feathered the great empty room all about with fern-tree fronds—hanging them from extemporised chandeliers, and from wire netting stretched over the ceiling, and from doorless doorways, rooted in masses of shrubs and blossoms that made a bower of the whole place. It was just such a task as she delighted in, and she was considered to have completed it successfully at four o'clock, when she put her finishing touches to a trophy over the chimney-piece, which, though rather complicated as to symbolism, being arranged on a foundation of breech-loaders and riding-whips, had a bold and pleasing effect.

At four o'clock the guests began to arrive. She was directing her attendants to sweep up the last of her litters from the newly-polished floor, when the Digbys' waggonette drove in at the wide-standing garden gates, and rattled up to the house.

After them came other buggies in quick succession. Grooms and house servants poured out to receive them; doors banged; confused voices and laughter rose and fell in waves of pleasant sound through the maze of passages intersecting the rabbit-warren of a house.

Rachel ran to a window and looked out in time to see Lucifer led off to the stables blowing and panting, and jangling his bridle, but stepping out still with unconquered spirit, as became

a brave old horse of noble lineage, whom such a master owned.

Mr. Kingston, the only other person just then in the room, came behind her and laid his hands with the air of a proprietor on her shoulders.

"Whose hack is that?" he inquired, with languid curiosity. "Looks a good sort of breed, something like your mare in colour, only much bigger."

"Mr. Dalrymple's," murmured Rachel.

"Dalrymple? — that brother of Mrs. Digby's you spoke of? I've heard of that fellow. I was curious to know who he was, and I made inquiries at the club. He is a rather considerable scamp, if all tales are true."

"All tales are not true," replied the girl, with majestic calmness.

"And pray how do *you* know?" he

retorted quickly, a little amused and a great deal irritated by her highly indiscreet behaviour. "I don't suppose that you have heard all that I have—at any rate, I *hope* not."

"I know enough," she stammered hurriedly; "I know the worst anyone can say against him."

"I hope not," repeated Mr. Kingston, with ominous gravity.

"And I know he has done wrong—done very wrong, indeed; but he has had such terrible provocations—he has been, oh, so dreadfully unfortunate!" she went on, wishing heartily that she had not undertaken her new friend's defence, yet finding it easier to go through with it now than to turn back and desert him. "And, whatever he may have been once, he

is doing nothing to harm anybody now; and it is cruel of people to be always raking up the past, when it is done with and repented of, and throwing it in his teeth. Any of us would think it hard and unfair—you would yourself."

"Never mind me, my dear; my past is not being called in question that I am aware of."

Mr. Kingston's not very placid temper was rising.

"He is doing nothing wrong now," she repeated, frightened but reckless; "if he were, Mr. Thornley would not invite him here—he said so himself. And Lucilla, though she does not like him—nobody likes him, indeed—says he would never do a mean action, and that he has perfect manners,

and that he is a thorough gentleman every way. I think they all agree about *that*."

"And yet don't like him. That is rather inconsistent. And what about yourself, Rachel? If it is not a rude question—are you an exception in this respect, or not?"

He had taken his hands from her shoulders, and was standing sideways in the embrasure of the window, so that he could see her face; and he was smiling in a most unpleasant manner.

Rachel had never seen him like this before, and the first seed of active dislike was sown where as yet there had been nothing worse than indifference. The familiar colour rose and flooded her white brow and her whiter

throat. She clenched her hands to still the flutter of her heart. She shut her teeth and struggled in silence against an ignominious impulse to cry.

But Mr. Kingston continued to watch her with that sardonic curiosity; and presently, like the traditional worm, she turned on him.

"Yes," she said, "I am an exception. I like Mr. Dalrymple very much—what little I know of him. I have seen no reason to do otherwise. I do not pay any attention to vulgar gossip."

A timid woman, trying to be defiant, generally fails by overdoing it; and so did she, poor child. Mr. Kingston heard the emphasis of strong emotion, that she would have given worlds to keep back, vibrating through her tremulous accents, and it drove him beyond those

considerations of policy and politeness which he made a boast of as his rule of life and action—especially in his dealings with women. Rachel, however, in the category of women, was exceptionally placed with respect to him; and I suppose one must do him the justice to concede that this was an exceptional emergency.

"I'll tell you what," he said, smiling no longer, and speaking with a rough edge to his voice that betokened the original rude nature, usually so carefully clothed, and that she instinctively resented as an indignity, "Thornley can do as he likes about the people he brings here to associate with his wife, but I won't have you making acquaintance with a vagabond like that."

"I have already made his acquaintance," she said quietly.

"Then I beg you will break it off."

"How can I break it off while he is in the same house with me?"

She was surprised to find how strong she was to withstand this incipient tyranny; and yet her heart contracted with a pain very like despair.

"There will be so many people that one — and he a man — may be easily avoided, if you wish to avoid. And you *will* wish to do what would please me, wouldn't you, dear?" he demanded, perceiving that he was bullying her, and trying to correct himself.

"Yes," she replied; "certainly. But

I hope you will not ask me to be rude to one of my cousin's guests. I don't mind what else I do to please you. And when I am married, I will of course know nobody but the people you like."

"You are as good as married to me already," he said, putting his arm round her shoulder as she stood before him, with all sorts of changes and revolutions going on within her. "And of course I don't want you to be rude — I don't want you to be anything. Simply don't take any notice of Dalrymple—he will quite understand it; don't dance with him, or have anything to do with him."

"Not dance with him!" she broke out sharply.

Her evident dismay and disappoint-

ment, together with her unconscious efforts to evade his embrace, exasperated his already ruffled temper afresh.

"Certainly not," he said, with angry vehemence. "I shall be exceedingly annoyed and vexed if I see you dancing with that man."

Rachel did not know until now how much she had secretly set her heart upon doing this forbidden thing; as her exigent lover did not know until now that he had it in him to be so horribly jealous.

"He will be sure to come and ask me," she said, with a despairing sigh.

"Very well. If he does, I beg you will refuse him."

"Then I must refuse everybody."

"Not at all. He will quite understand that there are reasons why he should be exceptionally treated."

"And do you think I will make him understand *that?*" she burst out, with pathetic indignation that filled her soft eyes with tears. "Do you think I would be so—so infamously rude and cruel? Oh, Mr. Kingston"—she never called him "Graham" except in her letters, though he tried his best to make her—"you don't want to spoil all my pleasure to-night, which was going to be such a happy night?"

"Your pleasure doesn't depend on dancing with Mr. Dalrymple, I *hope.*"

"No—no; but may I not treat him like all the rest, for Lucilla's sake—for common politeness' sake?"

"No, Rachel. I don't want to be unkind, my dear, but you must remember your position, and that now you belong to me. A lady who understands these matters can quite easily manage to get off dancing with a man if she wishes, without being rude. You must learn those little social accomplishments, and this is a very good time to begin. Now let us change the subject. Kiss me, and don't look so miserable, or I shall begin to think — but that it would be insulting you too much — that you have fallen in love with this disreputable ruffian."

Mr. Kingston tried to assume a light and airy manner, but his badinage had a menacing tone that was very chilling.

Rachel, strange to say, did not blush at all; she quietly excused herself on the plea that she must go and arrange her dishevelled costume, and (having no private bedroom to-night) went a long way down the garden to a retired harbour for half an hour's meditation.

CHAPTER III.

"WHERE THERE WAS NEVER NEED OF VOWS."

WHEN Rachel came back to the house it was nearly five o'clock.

There was to be a great high tea at six, for which no dressing was required, in place of the ordinary dinner; and as she did not feel inclined to meet the crowd of company that was assembling in the drawing-room sooner than was necessary —to tell the truth, she had been

crying, and her eyes were red —she returned by a back way to the ball-room, which she knew would be to all intents and purposes, empty.

As an excuse for doing so she carried in her arms some long wreaths of spiræa which she had discovered on a bush at the bottom of the garden, with which she intended to relieve the masses of box and laurestinus that made the groundwork of her decorations.

Lightly flitting up a stone-flagged passage at the rear of the house, she suddenly came upon Mr. Dalrymple. He emerged from the door of the laundry, which had been assigned to him for sleeping quarters, just as she was passing it.

"Oh!" she cried sharply, as if he had been a ghost; and then she caught her breath, and dropped her eyes, and blushed her deepest blush, which was by no means the conventional mode of salutation, but more than satisfied the man who did not know until this moment how eagerly he had looked for a welcome from her.

"How do you do?" he said, clothing the common formula with a new significance, and holding her hand in a strong grasp; "I was wondering where you were, and beginning to dread all kinds of disasters. Where are you going? May I carry these for you?"

He saw by this time the traces of her recent tears, and the cheerful

cordiality of his greeting subsided to a rather stern but very tender earnestness.

Silently he lifted the white wreaths from her arm, and began to saunter beside her in the direction of the ball-room, much as he had led her away into the conservatory on that memorable night, which was only a week, but seemed a year ago.

All the time she was thinking of Mr. Kingston's prohibition, and dutifully desiring to obey him; but she had no power in her to do more.

They passed through the servants' offices, meeting only Lucilla's maid, who was in a ferment of excitement with so many ladies to attend to, and had not a glance to spare for them;

they heard voices and footsteps all around them as they entered the house; but they reached the ball-room unperceived and unmolested, and found themselves alone.

The great room, with its windows draped and garlanded, was dim and silent; the gardener's steps stood in the middle ready for the lighting of the lamps; nothing but this remained to be done, and no one came in to disturb them.

For ten minutes they devoted themselves to business. Mr. Dalrymple mounted the steps, and wove the spiræa into whatever green clusters looked too thin or too dark; he touched up certain devices that seemed to him to lack stability; he straightened some flags that were hanging

awry; and Rachel stood below and offered humble suggestions.

When they had done, and had picked up a few fallen leaves and petals, they stood and looked round them to judge of the general effect.

"It is very pretty," said Mr. Dalrymple; "and it makes a capital ball-room. I have not seen a better floor anywhere."

"It was laid down on purpose for dancing," said Rachel, who knew she ought now to be making her appearance elsewhere, yet lingered because he did.

"Are you fond of dancing?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes," she said; "very."

"Will you give me your first waltz to-night?"

He was leaning an elbow on the piano, near which he stood, and looking down on her with that gentle but imperious inquiry in his eyes, which made her feel as if she had taken a solemn affidavit to tell the truth.

"I—I cannot," she stammered, after a pause, during which she wondered distractedly how she could best explain her refusal so as to spare him unnecessary pain; "I am very sorry —I would, with pleasure, if I could."

"Thank you," he said, with a slight, grateful bow. "Well, I could hardly hope for the first, I suppose. But I may have the second? Here are the programmes," he added, fishing into a basketful of them that stood on the

piano, and drawing two out; "let me put my name down for the second, and what more you can spare; may I?"

She took the card he gave her, opened it, looked at the little spaces which symbolised so much more than their own blank emptiness, looked up at him, and then—alas! She was a timid, tender, weakly creature when she was hurt, and she had not yet got over the effect of Mr. Kingston's harshness; and she had been crying too recently to be able to withstand the slightest provocation to cry.

She tried to speak, but her lip quivered, and a tear that had been slowly gathering fell with an audible pat upon the piano. He drew the

card from her in a moment, and at the same time swept away any veil of decorous reticence that she might have wished to keep about her.

"What is the matter?" he asked, with gentle entreaty, which in him was not inconsistent with a most evident determination to find out. "*I* am not distressing you, asking you to dance with me, am I?"

"Oh, no—it is nothing! Only please *don't* ask me," she almost sobbed, struggling against the shame that she was bringing on herself, and knowing quite well that she would struggle in vain.

He watched her in silence for half a minute—not as Mr. Kingston had watched her, though with even a

fiercer attentiveness, and then he said, very quietly,

"Why?"

But he had already guessed.

"Because—because—I have promised not to."

"You have promised Mr. Kingston?"

Scarlet with pain and mortification, in an agony of embarrassment, she sighed almost inaudibly,

"Yes."

"Not to dance with me? or merely not to dance waltzes?"

"Must I tell you?" she pleaded, looking up with appealing wet eyes into his hard and haughty face.

"Not unless you like, Miss Fetherstonhaugh. I think I understand perfectly."

"Oh, Mr. Dalrymple, I want to tell you about it, but I cannot. I am saying things already that I ought not to speak of."

"I don't think so," he replied quickly, suddenly softening until his voice was almost a caress, and set all her sensitive nerves thrilling like an Æolian harp when a strong wind blows over it. "It is in your nature to be honest, and to tell the truth. You are not afraid to tell the truth to me?"

"I would not tell you an untruth," she murmured, looking down; "but the truth—sometimes one must, sometimes one ought—to hide it. And I hoped you would not need to know about this."

"Why, how could I help knowing

it? Did you think it likely I might by chance forget you were in the ball-room to-night?"

What she thought clearly "blazed itself in the heart's colours on her simple face." But she did not lift her eyes or speak.

"I am very glad I know," he continued, in a rather stern tone. "If you had done this to me, and never told me why——"

"I should have trusted to you to guess that it was not my fault, and to forgive me for it," the girl interposed, looking up at last with a flash in her soft eyes that, as well as her words, told him a great deal more than she had any idea of.

"It was really so?" he demanded

eagerly. "It was not your own desire to disappoint me so terribly?"

"Oh, *no*."

"If you had been left to yourself you would have danced with me?"

"Yes, of course."

"Quite willingly?"

"You *know* I would!"

Mr. Dalrymple drew a long breath. It was rather a critical moment. But he was no boy, at the mercy of the wind and waves of his own emotions, and Rachel's evident weakness of self-control was an appeal to his strength that he was not the man to disregard. Still it was wonderful how actively during these last few minutes he had come to hate Mr. Kingston, whom he had never seen.

"I suppose," he said presently, "I must not ask the reason for this preposterous proceeding?"

"Do not," she pleaded gently. "There is no reason, really. It is but Mr. Kingston's whim."

"And are you determined to sacrifice me to Mr. Kingston's whim?"

She did not speak, and he repeated his query in a more imperious fashion.

"Are you really going to throw me over altogether, Miss Fetherstonhaugh? I only want to know."

She looked up at him piteously, and he softened at once.

"Tell me what I am to do," he said, in a low voice. "*Do* you wish me not to ask you for any dances? It is a horrible thing—it is enough

to make me wish I had gone to Queensland on Monday, after all—but I will not bother you. Tell me, am I not to ask you at all?"

"If you please," she whispered with a quick sigh, full of despairing resignation. "I am very sorry, but it is right to do what Mr. Kingston wishes."

"That is not my view in this case. However, it is right for *me* to do what *you* wish. And I will, though it is very hard."

Here Rachel, feeling all her body like one great beating heart, moved away to the door, driven by a stern sense of social duty.

Her companion did not follow her, and she paused on the threshold, turned round, and then suddenly hurried back to him.

"Mr. Dalrymple," she said, putting out her hand with an impulsive gesture, "do not wish you had gone to Queensland instead of coming here to-night. If you do I shall be *miserable!*"

He seized her hand immediately, and stooping his tall head at the same moment, brushed it with his moustache. Then, looking up into her scared face, he said—like a man binding himself by some terrible oath:

"*That* I never will."

Once before in that room they had touched the point where not only mere acquaintance but warmest friendship ends. Then it had been to her a new, incomprehensible experience; now she could not help seeing the reason and the meaning of it, though, perhaps, not so clearly as he.

In a moment she had drawn her hand away, and like a bird frightened from its nest, had vanished out of his sight, leaving him—thoroughly aroused from his normal impassiveness—gazing at the empty doorway behind her.

When they met again, ten minutes afterwards, it was in the drawing-room, which was crowded with people; and through all the crush and noise, she was as acutely conscious of his presence as if he alone had been there.

She moved about with tremulous restlessness and downcast eyes; afraid to look at him—afraid he should look at her; paying her little civilities mechanically, and conducting herself generally, to her aunt's extreme annoyance, more like a bashful schoolgirl and a poor relation than ever.

Mr. Kingston, doing his best to fascinate Miss Hale, who stood beside him, giggling and simpering and twiddling her watch-chain, looked anxiously at his little sweetheart when she entered, thought he saw signs of his own handiwork in her disturbed and downcast face, called her to him, and until the great tea-dinner was over, and they all had to disperse to dress, compassed her with devout attentions, intended to assure her of his royal forgiveness and favour.

But he did not remove the prohibition, which made her more and more resentful as she continued to think about it, and less and less responsive to his ostentatious "kindness;" and he treated Mr. Dalrymple—when he condescended to acknowledge his presence

at all—with a supercilious rudeness that Mr. Thornley, in conjugal confidence, declared to be "very bad form," and that prompted the gentle Lucilla to be "nicer" to the younger man than Rachel had ever seen her. He was so open in his hostility that it was generally noticed and talked of (and the cause of it more or less correctly surmised).

The only person who seemed absolutely indifferent to it and to him was Mr. Dalrymple himself; and in his secret heart he was much more glad than angry to have earned such pronounced dislike from such a quarter, though as impatient of what he called "impudence" as anybody.

That Adelonga ball was a memorable event to most of the people that it

gathered together—as what ball is not? Mr. Thornley celebrated the coming of age of his son and heir, to begin with. Mrs. Thornley appeared for the first time, "officially," after the birth of her baby, who was the hero of all occasions to *her*, and inaugurated a great "county" reputation as a charming hostess and woman.

Mrs. Hardy got her best point lace irretrievably ruined by catching it on an unprotected corner of the wire-netting upon which Rachel had worked her decorations; and she also saw the lamentable frustration of several wise plans that she had made.

Two young people became engaged; others, male and female, fell in love, or began those pleasant flirtations which led to love eventually.

Miss Hale on the other hand, quarrelled with Mr. Lessel, who took upon himself to object to her extravagant appreciation of Mr. Kingston's rather extravagant attentions; and their engagement was broken off.

Mr. Lessel at the same time captivated the fancy of a charming young lady, only daughter of the Adelonga family doctor, resident in the township close by, who was destined in less than twelve months to be his wife.

Mr. Kingston, surfeited with balls, had a deeper interest in this one than in any of the hundreds that he had attended in the course of a long and gay career.

Never before had he admired a pretty woman with such ferocious sincerity as

he admired his little Rachel to-night; never before had he used such rude tactics to make the object of his affections jealous—thereby to subdue rebellion in her; never before had he been so defied and circumvented by a being in female shape as he was to-night by this presumptive little nobody, whom he had singled out for honour, and who was bound to honour him, and his lightest wish.

As for Mr. Dalrymple and Rachel—they must be classed together in this catalogue of special experiences, for they shared theirs between them—the Adelonga ball marked a new and very memorable departure in the history of their lives. For half the evening they danced decorously apart.

Mr. Dalrymple justified Mrs. Thornley's

expectations, of course, and distinguished himself above all the dancing men assembled; Rachel, who had had but little teaching, was a dancer by nature and instinct, as light and effortless, as airy and graceful as a bit of wind-blown thistle-down.

She loved it, as she loved all pleasant and poetic things; and though she could not have the partner she wanted, and had to take whom she could get, she felt to-night, and more and more as the evening wore away, that she had never heard and felt, in the strains of mere senseless instruments and in the thrill of responsive pulses, music of mundane waltzes and galops of such inspired and impassioned beauty.

There was a young artist from Melbourne who played lovely airs on a

violin to a piano accompaniment, and he seemed literally to play upon her, spiritually sensitive as she was to-night to the lightest touch of that divine afflatus which makes poetry of certain passages in the most prosaic lives.

Now rapturously happy, now tragically miserable, and tremulously fluctuating up and down between these two extremes, she was blown about like a leaf in autumn wind by the subtle harmonies of that magical violin. At least she thought it was the violin. We know better.

At about twelve o'clock she went into the house on an errand for Lucilla, and came back by way of the conservatory, as the first bars of a Strauss waltz were stealing through the fern-roofed alleys, with nameless

tender associations in every liquid note.

For a few seconds she paused in the shadowy doorway, a slight, white figure against the dim background, with hair like a golden aureola, and milk-white neck and arms—a gracious vision of youth and beauty as prince could wish to see.

But the Sleeping Princess now was acutely wide awake; the life that ran in her quickened pulses was almost more than she could bear. Her eyes shone restlessly, her breath fluttered in her throat, her heart ached and swelled with some vague, irresistible passion, as the waves of that delicious melody flowed over her, like an enchanter's incantation.

A few paces off, within the ball-room,

Mr. Dalrymple stood with his back to the wall watching her; his dark face was lit and transfigured with the same kind of solemn exaltation. She turned her head, and they looked at one another, mutually conscious of the supreme moment that had unawares arrived.

He held out his hand—she almost sprang to meet him; and then, oblivious of betrothals, and promises, and houses, and diamonds, she floated down the long room, under the very noses of her aunt and Mr. Kingston, lying in a reckless ecstasy of contentment in her true love's arms.

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER THE BALL.

WHATEVER might have been Rachel's confusion of mind as to the nature and consequences of her escapade, Mr. Dalrymple, from the moment that he took her in his arms, understood the situation perfectly. It was sufficiently serious to a man in his position, who, whatever his faults, was the soul of honour; but it was never his way to dally with difficulties, and he left himself in no sort of

suspense or uncertainty as to how he would deal with this one.

Whether right or wrong, whether wise or foolish, in any sudden crisis requiring sudden choice of action, he obeyed his natural impulse, subject to his own rough code of duty only, without an instant's hesitation, and followed it up with unswerving determination, totally unembarrassed by any anxiety as to where it might lead or what it might cost him, or as to any ultimate consequences that might ensue.

In nine cases out of ten a man of honour, placed as he was now, would have regretted an unconsidered act of folly, and have cast about for means of extricating himself and the girl who was behaving badly to her affianced

husband from the position into which it had led them—even, perhaps, to the extent of using

> "Some rough discourtesy
> To blunt or break her passion."

But he was the one man in ten who, equally a man of honour, felt himself under no obligation to do anything of the kind. If she loved him—and now he knew she did; if he loved her, or was able to love her—and he allowed himself no doubt upon that point from this moment of her self-revelation, though he had not *meant* to permit anybody (least of all a mere child like this) to supplant the dead woman on whom the passion of his best years had been spent—then the thing was settled. They might waltz together till

daylight, and no one would have any right to interfere.

The social complications that surrounded them, and which a conventional gentleman would have considered of the last importance, were to him mere matters of detail. They must manage to get out of them as best they could.

So he carried her round and round the room, the most perfect partner he had ever danced with, who moved so sympathetically with all his movements that she might have been his shadow—but for the electric current of strong life that her hand in his, and her light weight on his shoulder, and the subtle sense of her emotion, sent thrilling through his veins; and in the teeming silence his brain was

busy making rapid plans and calculations for effectively dealing with the many difficulties that would come crowding upon both of them as soon as this waltz was over.

Clearly, the first thing to do was to dispose of ambiguities between themselves.

"Come into the conservatory," he said, in a quick under tone, when five silent, delicious minutes had passed; "I want to say something to you before these people begin to spread all over the place again."

But even as he spoke, as if a spell had been broken, the light and rapture died suddenly out of her face, her limbs relaxed, her airy footsteps faltered, she seemed to melt away in his arms.

"Oh," she whispered, looking up at him with tragic eyes, full of fear and despair, "how wicked I have been! What *will* he say to me?"

"Never mind *him*," replied Mr. Dalrymple; "you must not let him have any right to dictate to you any more—you must break off your engagement at once, and get out of his hands. Wicked! — the only wicked thing would be to deceive him any longer. You *know* you don't love him. Come into the conservatory, and let us talk about it. *Do* come—there is nobody there now!"

But Rachel, being a woman, and a coward, and only eighteen years old, would not come. She knew what she wanted, but she dared not do it—she dared not even think of it.

"I must not—I must not!" she protested, in a childish panic of terror. "Let me go, Mr. Dalrymple, *please*—I have done very wrong—I am afraid to stay——"

And slipping out of his arms, which did the utmost that courtesy permitted to hold her, she fled through a doorway near and disappeared; and thus threw away an opportunity the loss of which was to cost them both long days and nights of suspense and suffering—as she foresaw with agonies of regret, even while she did it.

Mr. Dalrymple danced and talked, and sauntered about, proud and cool as usual to the superficial observer, but raging with impatience in his heart, and watched for her return; but he saw her no more until supper

time, when she was led into the dining-room, looking very pale and quiet, on Mr. Kingston's arm.

The whole night passed, and he never had a chance to get near her again; though as may be supposed, it was from no lack of effort on his part; and he went to the laundry at last, hours after she had gone to bed, to change his clothes preparatory to taking a morning walk up the hills, without even having had the satisfaction of one look from her eyes, which, however timid and terrified, he felt sure would have told him the truth.

She did not come into the drawing-room before breakfast; and at that irregularly conducted meal she sat again by Mr. Kingston's side, the

whole table's length from him. But glancing round her as she took her seat, she met his fixed gaze, and bowed with a subtle, wistful impressiveness that reassured him completely as to the state of her mind towards him, let her outward actions be what they might.

It was very tantalising; all his habitual calmness was upset; his very hand trembled as he took his coffee from Lucilla, and once when his gentle hostess spoke to him, he did not hear her.

The fret of this state of things, it is needless to say, chafed his incipient passion into flame; and the flame was kept up thereafter, at a more or less fierce heat and brightness, by the winds of adversity that

ought to—and in nine cases out of ten would—have put it out.

After breakfast the company began to disperse in a desultory manner by instalments. Some of the guests lingered until the afternoon; some until the next day.

The Digbys were the first to leave—partly because they had so far to go, partly because Mrs. Digby was anxious about her children—and of course Mr. Dalrymple had to go with them.

He hunted in vain for Rachel when the breakfast party broke up. She *knew* he was hunting for her, and she longed to go to him, and therefore as a matter of course, she hid herself.

Only at the last moment, as he

was about to ride gloomily away, she appeared on the threshold of one of the inferior front doors, pale and shrinking, but desperate with vague despair—thinking to solace herself with one more glimpse of him when he would not know she was looking. But he saw her in a moment, flung himself from Lucifer's back, and caught her before she could steal away again.

It was not the sort of farewell he had hoped for—several of the ladies came straggling about them before they could exchange half a dozen words—but it was infinitely better than none.

"Are you going to Queensland?" Rachel asked, in a tone which said plainly—"Are you going away from me?"

"I must go," he replied; "but I shall not stay—I shall come back as quickly as possible. And you—what will you do ?"

She flushed scarlet and dropped her eyes, and her lips began to quiver. The rustle of Mrs. Hardy's majestic skirts was heard approaching. It was too late for confidences.

"I hope, when I come back, I shall find you free," he whispered hurriedly, emphasising the significance of the words with the crushing clasp of his hand over hers and the eager desire in his eyes; and then he took off his cap, included all the ladies in one last silent adieu, remounted his horse, and departed.

As he rode through the bush this lovely spring morning, near enough to

the waggonette to open the gates for it, but far enough away to indulge in his meditations undisturbed, he pondered many things; and particularly he wondered, with a devouring anxiety, what Rachel had been doing and thinking of since she left him so abruptly at midnight, after practically giving herself to him.

If he could have known it is doubtful if he would have felt so certain of her as he was, though nothing would have deterred him now from making the best fight in his power for the possession of her.

When, in terror of the consequences of what she had done, she broke away from him and escaped out of the ball-room, she rushed to her own room, forgetting until she dashed into

the middle of an untidy litter of open boxes and portmanteaus which Miss Hale had left on the floor, that it was not hers to-night; and then she turned and sped down one of the innumerable passages into the quiet starlight outside, and sought refuge in that lonely arbour at the bottom of the garden, which already, not many hours before, had given sanctuary to these new emotions.

That she courted bronchitis and consumption, exposing her bare warm arms and bosom to the chill of a frosty night, was a trivial circumstance quite unworthy of consideration.

In this arbour she abandoned herself to the full luxury of that passion which was neither joy nor grief, and yet had the pain and ecstasy of both in the sharpest degree.

She knelt on the damp floor, and leaned her arms on the dusty bench, regardless of panic-stricken ants and enterprising black beetles, and she shook from head to foot with sobs.

"Oh my love!" she murmured to herself. "Oh, my love!"

And then presently lifting herself up and appealing to the star-worlds far away, and the immutable universe in general:

"Oh, what shall I do? Oh, what can I do?"

By and bye she sat down on the bench, clasped her hands on her knees, and tried her best to compose herself.

The keen air made her shiver, and perhaps it did something to cool

her agitation and brace her nerves as well.

Slowly she gathered her wits together, made tremulous efforts to school herself to be womanly and courageous, and at last crept back to the lighted and crowded house, hugging a brave but terrible resolution.

She went to the nearest fire to warm herself. It was in a little room adjoining the dining-room, where the last preparations for supper were going on.

As she knelt on the hearthrug, extending her white arms to the blaze, Mr. Kingston came behind her and laid his hands on her shoulders, so silently and unexpectedly that she gave a little startled cry.

"Did I frighten you, my pet?" said he, gaily; "I beg your pardon. I couldn't think where you were gone to. I am afraid you are tired. You have been waltzing too much. That fellow Dalrymple does go round at a killing pace with his long legs. Poor Miss Hale couldn't stand him at all—she nearly fainted. Ah, naughty child! Didn't I tell you not to dance with him? And you never paid the least heed! If this is how you defy me now, what am I to expect after we are married, eh?"

She looked up in his face with guilty, bewildered eyes. He was not by any means so cool as he assumed to be, but it was evident that he intended to ignore her offence, and was not going to scold her.

He was not young and rash, if she was; and the few minutes he had taken for reflection, during her absence in the garden, had shown him where the path of wisdom lay. Her first sensation was one of extreme relief; and then she became slowly conscious of a vague sinking at her heart.

Once more she sighed to herself—feeling discouraged and overpowered, and unequal to the formidable vastness of her resolution—"Oh, what shall I do?"

It would have been much better—much easier—if he had scolded her.

Before the revels of the night were quite over, Mrs. Hardy sent her to bed, noticing that she was looking

unusually quiet and pale. She was very glad to go, and made haste to hide herself in the little impromptu nest that had been prepared for her on a couch in her aunt's room, before that lady should require the use of her apartment.

She was wide awake, however, when Mrs. Hardy joined her, and too restless to disguise it; and the elder woman, who knew nothing of the girl's entanglements with her two lovers—who had, indeed, congratulated herself on the prudent abstinence which had been unexpectedly practised with reference to "that objectionable young man" who was such a dangerously delightful dancer—gossiped and grumbled over the little events of the evening, chiefly of the accident to her

lace and the absurdities of Miss Hale and Mr. Lessel, who were publicly known to have had a serious misunderstanding, unaware of her listener's pre-occupation, until the candles were finally extinguished.

About an hour later, as she was anxiously cogitating what steps she should take towards the repairing of her own mishap, Mrs. Hardy thought she heard a suspicious sound in the silence of the room.

"Rachel," she called, softly; "is that you, child?"

No answer. Only a rustle of drapery, indicating that Rachel had turned over in her bed. She listened a few minutes, and the suspicious sound was repeated. Raising herself on her elbow, she called more loudly.

"You are not *crying*, Rachel, are you?"

The girl flung herself out of bed, ran across the room, a little white ghost in the faint dawn, and threw her arms round her aunt's neck. She had no mother, poor little thing, to tell her troubles to; and she wanted a mother now.

"Oh, dear aunt Elizabeth," she sobbed passionately, "do help me—I am so miserable! I don't want to marry Mr. Kingston! I don't love him—I have made a mistake! I didn't think enough about it, and now I know we should never suit each other. Won't you tell him I was too young, and that I made a mistake? Won't you—oh, please do!—help me to break it off?"

On what a mere chance does destiny depend.

If Mrs. Hardy's evening had been triumphant and prosperous—if she had not torn her best lace, and torn it in consequence of Rachel's carelessness—she would probably have received the girl's touching confidence as a tender mother should. As it was, she felt that after all her fatigues and worries, this was really too much.

"What nonsense are you talking, child?" she exclaimed angrily. "Is it any fault of Mr. Kingston's if Miss Hale behaves like an idiot? She is nothing but a vulgar flirt, and he knows it as well as you do—only it is his way to be attentive to all women."

"Miss Hale!" repeated Rachel vaguely;

"I'm not thinking of Miss Hale. I am not blaming anybody—only myself. I was very wrong to accept Mr. Kingston at the first—oh, aunt, you *know* we are not suited to each other! He ought to marry somebody older and grander, and I—I thought I should like to be rich, and to live in that house—and I thought I should come to love him in time; but now I know it was all a mistake. Do—do let me break it off before it goes any further! Let me stay with you—I shall be *quite* happy to stay with you and Uncle Hardy, if you'll only let me!"

"You are dreaming," replied her aunt, giving her a slight shake in the extremity of her dismay and mortification; "you talk like a baby. Do you think a man is to be taken up one day

and thrown away the next? And it is worse than that to jilt a man—and Mr. Kingston of all people—after being engaged to him for months, as you have been, and after leading him into all sorts of preparations and expense. The bare idea is monstrous! And all for nothing at all, but some ridiculous sudden fancy! You may have seen things of that sort done amongst the people you have been brought up with, but no *lady* would think of disgracing herself and her family by such conduct."

"Oh, aunt!" moaned Rachel piteously, as if she had had an unexpected blow.

"I don't like to speak harshly to you, my dear," Mrs. Hardy proceeded, in a rather more gentle, but still irri-

tated tone. "Only you *must* not vex me with such absurd and childish notions. I know it is only a passing whim—you are over-tired, and you are hurt because Mr. Kingston paid Miss Hale so much attention, though it is only what he does to all women, without meaning anything whatever; but still it is a serious and horrible thing—breaking an engagement, a really happy engagement, as yours is—jilting a kind, good man, after giving him every encouragement—even to *think* of! Don't let me hear you mention it again, unless you want to break my heart altogether. And after all I have done for you—I don't want to boast, but I *have* been a good aunt to you, Rachel, and you would have been in a poor place but for me—the least you can do

is to respect my wishes, especially as you know I wish nothing but what is for your real good and welfare."

Rachel wandered back to her bed, laid her head gently on the pillow, and closed her eyes. Mrs. Hardy in the dead silence that presently ensued, was relieved to think that she had "settled off" at last; but it was not sleep that kept her so quiet—it was the calmness of defeat and despair.

CHAPTER V.

RACHEL'S FIRST VISIT IN MELBOURNE.

IN the last week of August, when the place was looking its loveliest—the rustic gables of the pretty house all hung with wistaria, and the shrubberies full of fragrant bushes of purple and white lilac—Mrs. Hardy, Mr. Kingston, and Rachel took their departure from Adelonga. It was to one of them a truly heart-breaking business.

Rachel stood on the verandah while

the horses were being put to, clasping Lucilla and the baby alternately to her heart, and wept without restraint, until her eyes were swollen, and her delicate colour resolved into unbecoming red patches, and there was scarcely a trace of her beauty and brightness left.

No one but herself was at all able to realise what this moment cost her. She was not only leaving a place where she had spent the happiest period of her youth; not only parting from friends with whom she had established the most tender and sympathetic relations; she was closing a chapter, or rather a brief passage, which was the one inspired poem of her life; and she was saying good-bye to Hope.

As long as she was at Adelonga,

there was the chance that Mr. Dalrymple might come back—at any rate, notwithstanding the Queensland arrangements, there was a constant impression that he was near. And as long as she was at Adelonga she had felt bold to strive, by various feeble and ineffectual devices, to extricate herself from her engagement.

Now she was going where it seemed to her her lover would never be allowed to reach her, and where in a hard world of money and fashion, and under the terrible dominion of "the house," she would be a helpless victim in the hands of Fate.

"Good-bye, darling Lucilla!" she sobbed; "thank you so much—I have been so happy here—I am so sorry to go away!"

The gentle woman was inexpressibly touched, and of course cried for company. Mrs. Hardy had her own maternal reluctance to face an indefinite term of separation from her daughter. And altogether Mr. Kingston was not without justification for his unusually irritable frame of mind.

He did not like to see women crying; he was particularly annoyed that Rachel should exercise so little command over herself, and that she should have red eyes and a swollen nose; and he was uneasy about the untoward episode which had been the first hitch in the smooth current of his engagement, and wondered whether it could be possible that a lingering fancy for that Dalrymple fellow was making her so unwilling to return to her Melbourne life.

Moreover, he hated country travelling —long drives over rough bush roads, and bivouacs at country inns, where the food was badly cooked and the wine detestable; and he was suspicious about the behaviour of the Adelonga horses, whose little traits of character came out rather strongly in the invigorating air of spring; and he had a nasty touch of gout.

However, the day was fine, and the drive was lovely. As she was carried along, with the soft air blowing in her face, full of the delicious fragrance of golden wattle, Rachel ceased to cry—becoming calm, and pensive, and pretty again—and took to meditation; wondering, for the most part, what Queensland was like, and how it was she could ever have thought Melbourne, as

a place of residence, preferable to the bush.

They passed a charming little farm-house, more picturesque in the simple elegance of its slab walls and brown bark roof than any Toorak villa of them all, set in its little patch of garden, with fields of young green corn and potatoes, neatly fenced in, behind it. It had its little rustic outbuildings, its bright red cart in the shed, its tidy strawyard, its cows and pigs and poultry feeding in the bush close by.

The farmer was working in his garden; the farmer's wife, on her knees beside him, was weeding and trimming the borders of thyme that ringed the little flower beds. They both paused to gaze at the imposing equipage crashing

along with its four strong horses, and at the ladies and gentlemen perched so high above them; and Rachel, looking down from her box-seat, thought she had never seen such a picture of rural and domestic peace. She had suddenly ceased to regard material wealth and splendour as in any way essential to happiness.

To live in some such home as this (provided one had enough to live on and to pay one's way), working with one's own hands for the man one loved—that seemed to her at this moment the ideal lot in life.

Having started from Adelonga an hour before noon, the horses were taken out at two o'clock to be fed and watered, and the little party camped beside a shady water-hole for lunch.

Lucilla had put up a bounteous basket of good things, and all the materials for afternoon tea; and the fun of arranging the grassy table first, and of making a fire and boiling the kettle afterwards—not to speak of the very satisfactory meal that intervened —had its natural effect upon our impressionable heroine of eighteen.

Her *fiancé*, much revived by a tumbler of dry champagne, carefully cooled in the water-hole, was also in improved spirits and temper, and he set himself to be very kind to his little sweetheart, and forgave her all her misdeeds.

Between three and four, having had their tea, the horses were put to, and they started on their way again; and just at nightfall they arrived at the

railway, and at the inn where they were to spend the night.

Here they found dinner awaiting them, of which Rachel partook in sleepy silence; and she went to bed soon afterwards, and slept too soundly even to dream of trouble.

In the morning they parted from Mr. Thornley, and started by the first train to town; at noon they lunched in a railway refreshment-room; and in the middle of the afternoon they found themselves once more in Toorak, being helped out of the family brougham by good-natured Ned, and welcomed into the green satin drawing-room by his bright-faced wife.

"And so you are back again at last!" exclaimed Beatrice gaily, as she took her young cousin into her arms.

"And how are you, dear child? Why you look quite pale. Take off your hat and sit down at once, and have some tea. Mr. Kingston, I don't think this country air that they talked so much about has done anything very wonderful after all. Rachel is not looking so well as she was when she left."

Rachel blushed a lovely rose-colour immediately, of course, and Mr. Kingston looked up at her with vague anxiety.

"I don't think she is, myself," he said; "I noticed it as soon as I got up there. But she will be all right now she is home again."

"I am only tired," murmured Rachel.

"A girl like you has no business to

be tired," retorted the little woman brusquely.

It did not escape her sharp eyes that something was the matter, and she determined to take the earliest opportunity to find out what it was.

"I do hope to goodness," she said to herself, "that it is not her engagement that she is tired of—and everything going on so nicely!"

And then she took off Rachel's seal-skin cap and jacket, settled her by the fireside, furnished her with a cup of fragrant tea and some thin bread and butter, and left her to herself while she attended to her mother's wants.

Beatrice and her tea had a generally cheering and invigorating effect.

Mr. Kingston, making himself comfortable in a very easy chair, grew talkative and witty upon the news of the day and the latest items of fashionable gossip; in the society of this charming little woman of the world—*his* world—the satisfaction of being in town again began to creep over him pleasantly.

He stayed for half an hour—outstaying Ned, who retired modestly at the end of twenty minutes; then he led Rachel into the hall, kissed her, told her to go to bed early and come out with him for a ride in the morning, and went off to his club—sorry to leave his little lady-love, but glad to be able to get his letters, to hear what was going on in Melbourne, and to read his

"Argus" on the day of publication again.

After his departure Mrs. Hardy and Beatrice plunged fathoms deep in talk. Mrs. Hardy wanted to know how her husband and her servants, and her neighbours and her friends, had been conducting themselves during her absence, and Beatrice wanted minute particulars about Lucilla and the baby.

Rachel had no occasion to feel herself *de trop;* at the same time she saw she was not wanted. She sauntered softly round the room, laid some music scattered about over the piano in a neat pile, re-arranged some yellow pansies that were tumbling out of a green Vallauris bowl, and then stole noiselessly into the hall and out of the house.

The grounds of the Hardy domain were more beautiful with flowers now than she had ever seen them; but she did not stay amongst the flowers. She went down little lonely paths, intersecting vegetable beds and forcing-frames, to a gate at the bottom of the kitchen-garden, where she was within speaking distance of the workmen engaged on the new house, with nothing to impede a full view of their operations.

She was feverishly anxious to know how they were going on—whether they were still "pottering at the foundations," or whether the stage of walls had set in.

The working day was not yet over, and the well-known chinking and clinking

of the stonemason's implements smote her ear. She thought, when she began to count them, that there were a great many more men than there used to be, and she wondered why this was.

The young man who was sent out by the architects to supervise the builders, and whose acquaintance she had made with Mr. Kingston, was walking about the dusty enclosure, and presently recognising her, he lifted his hat, and then seeing that she still lingered, came up to the gate to speak to her.

"How are you getting on, Mr. Moore?" she asked pleasantly. "Are you still doing the foundations?"

Mr. Moore assured her that they had completed the foundations, and

that they were getting on splendidly.

"Won't you come out and have a look at what has been done?" he inquired.

She thanked him and said she would; and he opened the gate with alacrity, and escorted her through a labyrinth of bricks and stones, over ground strewn thickly with sharp-edged chips that cut holes in her boots, very well pleased to be the first to show her the progress that had been made in her absence.

She could see for herself that a great deal had been done. The trenches were filled up; great square blocks of stone ridged the outlines of the ground-floor rooms—little bits of rooms they looked, and not at all like the stately

and spacious apartments of the architect's design; but it seemed to her that what had been done could not be a tenth or twentieth part of all that there was to do.

"I suppose," she said, "it takes a long time to build the walls and make such a quantity of windows?"

"Oh, dear, no," responded Mr. Moore cheerfully. "All the worst of the work is over now, as far as the shell is concerned; the walls will run up in no time. It is a big house, but there are plenty of men on it, and all materials ready. It is after the shell is done that the real tedious work commences."

"You mean after the roof is on?"

"Yes. The interior decorations are

the chief thing about this house. The outside is not much."

"When do you expect the shell will be finished?" asked Rachel, in fear and trembling.

"Some time in the course of the summer—within the next two or three months probably."

"And the roof on?"

"Oh, yes; of course the roof on," he replied.

There was a pause; and then she said in a very small, thin voice:

"Thank you, Mr. Moore. I think I must go back now."

He escorted her back to the garden gate, lifted his hat, and bade her good evening; and it struck him suddenly—with far more force than it had struck Beatrice—that she was looking

extremely unwell, and not at all like the bright and blooming creature that she was when she went away.

CHAPTER VI.

IN MRS. HARDY'S STORE-ROOM.

RACHEL was very young, no doubt, but she was growing rapidly. To all intents and purposes she was at least five years older when she came home from Adelonga than she was when she went there; and the process of development by no means ceased or slackened at that point.

The blossoming of her womanhood had come suddenly, like the blossoming

of the almond trees, in one warm burst of spring; but the inner heart, that budded in secret, continued to swell and ripen, in spite of—perhaps because of—the absence of sunshine in her spiritual life.

The physical change in her was noticeable to everybody. Her constitution was much too sound to be easily injured by mental wear and tear; but her health was necessarily affected in a greater or less degree, temporarily, for the better or for the worse, by the more powerful of those mental emotions to which her body was peculiarly sensitive and responsive at all times.

So she lost some of her delicate pinky colour, and her large eyes grew heavy and dreamy, and she looked

generally faded and altered, in the dulness of these empty days. She had no more enthusiasm for Toorak life and Melbourne dissipations. She went into no raptures over jewels and dresses, or any pretty things; she had none of the old zest for operas and balls.

She was quiet, and silent, and preoccupied, moving about the house with a strange new dignity of manner (resulting from the total absence of self-consciousness), a sort of weary tolerance, as if she had lived in it all her life, and was tired of it.

After watching her for a few days, secretly, and in much perplexed anxiety, Mrs. Reade made up her mind that something was seriously wrong, and that it was time for her to interfere

to set it right. She went to her mother in the first place for information.

It was eleven o'clock in the morning, and Mrs. Hardy was in her store-room, counting out the day's allowance of eggs to an aggrieved and majestic cook.

The little woman stood by silently, watching the transaction with a smile in her brilliant eyes, thinking to herself what a great mistake it was, if poor mamma could but see it, to insist on an inflexible morality and economy in these petty matters; and when it was completed, after a little acrimonious discussion, she quietly shut the door, and addressed herself to her own business in her customary straightforward way.

"I want to know what is the matter with Rachel," she began, spreading her handkerchief on a keg of vinegar, and sitting down on it deliberately.

Mrs. Hardy mechanically sought repose in the one chair of the apartment, which stood in front of the little table where she was in the habit of making out her accounts.

"I'm sure that is more than I can tell you, my dear. What an insolent woman that is!—if she thinks I am going to let her have the run of my stores, as Mrs. Robinson did, she is very much mistaken."

"Something is wrong with Rachel," proceeded Mrs. Reade calmly; "and I want to find out what it is."

Mrs. Hardy made an effort to smooth her ruffled feathers down.

"I think the child must be fretting for Lucilla and the baby, Beatrice. She and Lucilla were bosom friends, and she just went wild about the baby—it was quite ridiculous to see her with it. And when she left them she cried as if she were completely heartbroken; and she has never been like herself since. I can't think what else ails her—unless she is out of sorts, and wants some medicine. I did give her some chamomilla yesterday, but it does not seem to have done her any good."

"No," said Mrs. Reade, with a sudden smile, "I don't think it is a case for chamomilla. She is not ill; she is unhappy—anyone can see that. *You* can see it, can't you?"

"I'm sure no girl has less cause to be unhappy," protested Mrs. Hardy

evasively, in a fretful and anxious tone. "It is very ungrateful of her if she is."

"But what can have caused it? She was all right when she went to Adelonga. Something must have happened while she was there. She is not merely fretting after Lucilla and the baby—oh, no, it is a deeper matter than that. I am afraid—I really am seriously afraid, by the look of things—that it has something to do with Mr. Kingston." Her mother, though silent, was so obtrusively conscious and uneasy that she felt assured, the moment that she looked at her, of the correctness of her surmise. "Oh, do tell me what has happened!" she continued, eagerly. "Something has, I know. It is what I have been dreading all along—with these tiresome delays! They ought to have been

married out of hand, and then there would have been no trouble."

"If there *is* anything wrong between them," Mrs. Hardy reluctantly admitted, "it is—I must say that for Rachel, though she is very trying with her silly childishness—it is Mr. Kingston's doings."

"Of course," assented Mrs. Reade, promptly.

"It was on the night of the ball. He rather neglected Rachel—the first time I ever knew him to do it—and he flirted in that foolish way of his—with Minnie Hale. You know Minnie Hale?—a great, fat, giggling creature—quite a common, vulgar sort of girl—not in the least *his* sort, one would have imagined. I don't wonder that Rachel was offended; I was extremely

vexed with him myself, for he did it so openly—everybody noticed it. It was so bad, really, that the man that horrid girl was engaged to, Mr. Lessel, broke off with her on account of it. That will show you. She was a great deal worse that he was, of course. But he went great lengths. Perhaps he had been taking too much wine," she sighed, plaintively.

"No," said Mrs. Reade. "He has plenty of faults, but *that* is not one of them."

"Rachel was deeply hurt and shocked," Mrs. Hardy proceeded. "Naturally, for it was not a thing she had been used to, poor child. She took it very much to heart—so much that she wanted, like Mr. Lessel, to break off her engagement there and then." Here Mrs. Hardy

went into details of poor Rachel's unsuccessful struggle for deliverance. "But of course I reasoned with the foolish child," she added conclusively; "I talked her out of *that*."

Mrs. Reade sat very still, tracing patterns on the floor with the point of her parasol.

"And did they have a quarrel?" she asked, vaguely. She was evidently thinking of something else.

"No. There was a coolness, of course, but—oh, no, I am sure they did not quarrel. He has seemed anxious to make up for it, and she has not shown any temper or resentment. But things have been uncomfortable if you can understand — very unsatisfactory and uncomfortable—ever since. I think she was disappointed in him, and cannot

get over it. I have been hoping that it was all right, and that she was only unsettled and dispirited about leaving Adelonga. But now you mention it—yes, now I think of it—I'm afraid she is brooding over that other trouble still. Foolish child! she lives in a world of romantic ideals, I suppose."

"*Why* did Mr. Kingston flirt with Minnie Hale?" asked Mrs. Reade, looking up at her mother impressively.

"Oh, my dear, you know him as well as I do."

"You think he was worn out with being good?"

"He *has* been good, Beatrice—very good—ever since his engagement."

"Yes, he has. But if he had had a mind to misbehave, I don't think his duty to Rachel would have stopped him. The fact is, since his engagement he has never wanted anyone but her. I have watched him closely, and wonderful as it seems, he has never shown the slightest disposition to flirt beyond the stage of pretty speeches — not even when she was away — not even with Sarah Brownlow."

"It is a great pity," sighed Mrs. Hardy. "I wish they were safely married."

"And at the worst of times," the younger lady proceeded thoughtfully, regardless of the interjection, "he was fastidious in his choice—he liked someone who was either pretty or

clever, or decidedly attractive in some way. I never knew him take any notice of a girl of *that* sort before."

"There is no accounting for men's tastes, my dear."

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Reade replied promptly; "I know that Minnie Hale is not *his* taste. I know he did not go on with her as you say he did, merely for the pleasure of it to himself. I think it must have been to spite Rachel."

"Beatrice!"

"Yes, mother—that is what I think. It is the only reasonable motive he could have had."

"But why on earth should he wish to spite Rachel?"

"That is what I want you to tell

me. You were in the house with them—try and think of all that happened just before the ball. I'm certain something was wrong between them, to begin with. Perhaps you did not notice it at the time, but you might remember little circumstances—" Mrs. Reade broke off, and watched her mother's disturbed face with bright attentiveness. "*Rachel* did not flirt with anybody, did she?"

"Now, my dear, you know the child is incapable of such a thing."

"Oh, I don't mean deliberately, of course. But she might do it accidentally, with those sentimental eyes of hers. And she *is* so charmingly pretty!"

"No, she certainly did not flirt," said Mrs. Hardy; "she has never

given him any uneasiness on that score, pretty as she is, and never will, I am quite sure. But there was a man——"

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Reade, laying her parasol across her knees, and folding her hands resignedly.

"Why do you say 'ah,' Beatrice, before you hear what I am going to tell you? There was a man there whom Mr. Kingston disliked very much. He gave himself airs, and they somehow came into collision, and Mr. Kingston was in rather a bad temper. That was all that went wrong before the ball, and Rachel had nothing to do with that."

"Do you think so? I am certain she had," the young lady replied deliberately.

"Well, if you think you know better than I do, who was there to see——"

"Go on, dear mamma. Tell me all about him. Who was he? What was he like?"

Mrs. Hardy, pocketing her dignity, proceeded to describe Mr. Dalrymple, with great amplitude of detail, as he had appeared from her point of view.

The result was a kind of superior Newgate villian, of good birth and distinguished presence, whom Mrs. Reade regarded with a sinking heart.

"Oh, dear me!" she sighed, blankly, "what a pity! What a grevious pity!"

"I *can't* see why you should look

at it in this way, Beatrice. I tell you she had little or nothing to say to him, and she only danced with him once the whole evening. I took care to point out to her the kind of man he was, and to warn her against him."

"You ought not to have done that."

"My dear, you will allow me to be the best judge of what I ought to do. She was very good and obedient, and she acted in every way as I wished her."

"But she liked him, didn't she?" asked Mrs. Reade.

"Yes," Mrs. Hardy admitted, with evident reluctance, "I am afraid she did like him."

"I am sure she did," said Mrs.

Reade, decisively. "And there is more than liking in the matter, unless I am much mistaken. I have never been in love myself," she remarked frankly, "but I fancy I know the symptoms when I see them. I feared from the first that it was something of that sort that was the matter with her. At any rate—" putting up her hand to stay the imminent protest on her mother's lips—"at any rate, if he has not made her love him, he has made her discontented with Mr. Kingston."

"Well, Beatrice," the elder woman exclaimed, with an impatient sigh, rising from her chair, "if such a thing should be—if such a misfortune should have happened after all my care—we must only do the best

we can to mend it. Thank goodness he's gone. He is not at all likely to give her another thought. If he does—" Mrs. Hardy shut her mouth significantly, and her Roman nostrils dilated.

"You can't help his thinking what he likes," said Mrs. Reade, with a gleam of mockery in her bright eyes.

"I can help his doing anything further to disturb her. I can see that he never meets or speaks to her again."

Mrs. Reade continued to smile, looking at her majestic mother with her bird-like head on one side.

"I hope so," she said. "I'm sure I hope so, if you can do it without her knowledge. But if you should

have to act, whatever you do, don't make martyrs of them."

"Don't talk nonsense," retorted Mrs. Hardy.

CHAPTER VII.

"HE HAS COME BACK."

MRS. READE, being satisfied that she had found out Rachel's complaint—as indeed she had—put her under treatment without delay.

On the very day of her interview with her mother in the store-room, she sought and obtained permission to take the patient home with her for a week's visit, in order to try the experiment of change and a new set of

dissipations, and to make her preliminary investigations undisturbed.

She had a charming house of her own at South Yarra, which she "kept" admirably, and where, in an unpretensious manner, she had established a little *salon* that was a fashionable head centre in Melbourne society, and well deserved by virtue of its own legitimate merits to be so.

She was not severely orthodox in these matters, like Mrs. Hardy, who weighted her entertainments with any number of dull people, if they only happened to be in the right set; though she was quite ready to acknowledge the propriety of her mother's system in her mother's circumstances.

There was no want of refinement in her hospitality, but there was a delicate

flavour of Bohemianism that, like the garlic rubbed on the salad bowl, was the piquant element that made it delightful—to those, at any rate, who were sufficiently intelligent to appreciate it.

If men and women were uninteresting, she could have nothing to do with them, though they were the very "best people;" that is to say, she limited her intercourse to those ceremonial observances which rigid etiquette demanded.

If they were clever and cultured, and otherwise respectable and well-behaved, and were capable of being fused harmoniously into the general brightness of her little circle, she was inclined to condone a multitude of sins in the matter of birth and station.

Artists of all sorts, travellers and politicians, distinguished members of every profession (so long as their own merits and accomplishments distinguished them) were welcome at her house; where they would be sure to meet the most interesting women that a judicious woman, superior to the petty weakness of her sex, could gather together.

So it was that Mrs. Edward Reade's afternoons and evenings were synonymous with all that was intellectually refreshing and socially delightful to those who were privileged to enjoy them.

But so it was, also, that Rachel, in consideration of her youth, her impressionable nature, and what were supposed to be her democratic tendencies, had

not been allowed to know much about them hitherto.

"Now, however, the case is different," said Beatrice, authoritatively, as she sat in her little pony carriage at the front door, waiting for her cousin to come down stairs. "It will do her good to shake up her ideas a little, and draw her out of herself. And if she does take an undue interest in people of the lower orders"—looking at her mother with mocking bright eyes —"it will be so much the better. Perhaps Signor Scampadini, with that lovely tenor of his——"

"Oh, no, Beatrice. Mr. Kingston would very much dislike anything of that sort."

"Anything of what sort?" laughed Mrs. Reade. "Mr. Kingston can trust

me, mamma. And we must counteract Mr. Dalrymple somehow."

"Mr. Kingston himself ought to counteract him—if there is any counteracting necessary."

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Reade, shaking her head slightly. She said no more, but in her own mind she put that argument aside as useless.

There had been a time, indeed, when she had believed Mr. Kingston sufficient for all purposes, on the basis of Rachel's apparently modest spiritual needs; but now she knew she had been mistaken.

The girl had grown and changed since then, and the old conditions no longer fitted her. The little woman was disappointed, but she was too wise to make a fuss about it. Difficulties had

come that she ought to have foreseen and provided for, but since they had come, they must be dealt with. "Ah!" she said, with a sigh and a smile; and that was the extent of her lamentation.

So Rachel went away with her to South Yarra, and had a brilliant week of it. The weather was warm and lovely, and the soft air full of the delicate intoxication of spring time, to which she was peculiarly susceptible.

She basked in sunshine as she rattled about Melbourne streets and suburbs in Beatrice's little basket-carriage, and as she sat in Beatrice's bow-windowed drawing-room, gossiping over afternoon tea.

She had a month's allowance of society dissipation of the most seductive descrip-

tion in that week—music, dancing, *tableaux vivants*, dressing, shopping, sightseeing, swarms of gay and witty company from noon till midnight, every conceivable kind attention from her cousin, and the most flattering homage from everybody else—all in an easy and cosy way that was very charming and luxurious. It certainly cheered her up a great deal.

We *do* get cheered, against our intention and desire, against our belief almost, by these little amenities that appeal to our superficial tastes, even when we seem to ourselves to be full of trouble.

It is well for us that we are so susceptible to light impressions, to the subtle influences of the daily commonplace, which are like delicate touches to

a crude picture in their effect upon our lives; if we were not, our lives would hardly be worth having sometimes, crippled as they are with great sudden griefs and disappointments, and wasted with the lingering paralysis of spiritual loss and want.

Mrs. Reade, watching the effect of her prescription day by day, thought things were going on very nicely, and took great credit to herself. She could plainly perceive that the disturbing element in the family arrangements was no trifling ball-room fancy; but she had great faith in the girl's youth and gentle character, and in the efficacy of judicious treatment, and it seemed to her that her faith had not been misplaced.

At any rate, she justified her reputa-

tion as a clever woman by the tact she displayed in the management of her self-imposed task. No one could have done more, under the circumstances, to further the desired end. She did not have Mr. Kingston about her house too much; she thought Rachel would appreciate him more if she had time to miss him a little. Nor did she force the girl's confidence with respect to Mr. Dalrymple, or even invite it in any way—that is to say, not in any way that was apparent to *her*.

She took no notice of the obvious indications of her cousin's anxiety to extricate herself from her engagement, though secretly they caused her acute uneasiness. She was a kind little soul, and though quite content with a *mariage de convenance* herself, did not like to

see another woman driven into it against her will.

It was for Rachel's good that she should be tided over those temptations to squander a substantial future for a romantic present, which were peculiarly dangerous to a girl so undisciplined in worldly wisdom as she, and it was absolutely necessary to guard her against the machinations of profligate spendthrifts; but if she *could* have fallen in with the excellent arrangements that had been made for her, without repugnance and suffering, what great cause for thankfulness there would have been!

So, although she never wavered in her determination to do what she considered her duty, she did it, not only with judgment, but with the utmost gentleness and consideration.

She took Rachel to call on certain shabby and faded women who had made rash marriages with poor or unsteady men, that she might see the consequences of such imprudence in the sordid tastelessness of their dress and their household furniture.

She likewise presented to her notice the charming spectacle of a young bride of fashion, as she "received" on her return from her honeymoon, surrounded by all the refinements of wealth and culture in a perfectly-appointed home.

She spoke incidentally, but often, of the habits and customs of fast young men, in general and in particular, drawing picturesque illustrations from her own experience, which tended to show that they invariably made love to

every girl they came across, and forgot all about her the moment her back was turned. She showed her poetic photographs of foreign cities; she taught her the value of old lace and china.

And by these and other insidious devices, she really contrived to do something towards weakening the impression that Mr. Dalrymple had made, and strengthening the antagonistic cause.

But when the week was over, and she took her young charge back to her mother, intending to apply for an extension of leave, that she might pursue the treatment that had proved so beneficial, alas! all her patient work was undone in a moment, like the web of the Lady of Shalott, when she left off spinning to look at the irresistible Sir Lancelot riding by.

They arrived at the Toorak house rather late in the afternoon, after a visit to the Public Library to see the last new picture, and one or two entertaining calls; and they were told that Mrs. Hardy was out, but was expected in every minute.

Rachel jumped down from the carriage first, and ran lightly up the white steps into the hall, with a pleasant greeting to the servant who admitted her; and there she stood a few seconds, to look round upon all the familiar appointments, as people do when they return home after an absence.

And as she looked, her eye fell upon a card on the hall table, which she immediately picked up.

"John," she called sharply, wheeling round upon him with a sudden fierce-

ness of excitement that Mrs. Reade, a dozen yards off, understood to mean disaster of some sort; "John, when did this gentleman call?"

"About half an hour ago, miss."

"Oh, *John*—only half an hour!"

"He said he would call again to-morrow, miss."

Mrs. Reade came softly into the hall, carelessly adjusting her long train behind her.

"Who is it, dear?" she asked. But she had already guessed who it was.

Rachel held out the little slip of pasteboard with an unsteady, shrinking hand. She could not speak. There was a great light and flush of excitement in her face, which yet was as full of fear as joy.

"Roden Dalrymple," murmured Beatrice, reading hesitatingly, as if the name were unfamiliar to her. "Is not that one of Lucilla's friends?"

"Yes," said Rachel, drawing a long breath and speaking softly. "He was at Adelonga when we were there. He went away to Queensland, but—he has come back."

"Evidently he has. What a pity we missed him. He may have brought us some news from Adelonga. Oh, dear me, don't you want your tea very badly? I do. John go and get us some tea, will you?"

Mrs. Reade did not intend to commit herself to any course of action until she had time to think over this new and most embarrassing complication, so she dismissed Mr. Dalrymple from the conversation.

Rachel turned the card about in her hands, reading its inscription over and over again. She was going to carry it away; but she reluctantly went back and laid it where she had found it. Then she followed Beatrice into the drawing-room like one in a dream.

The little woman watched her closely from the corner of her bright eyes, and she was terribly alarmed. She had had no idea until now what a formidable person this Roden Dalrymple was. The girl was in a quiver of excitement from head to foot. She wandered restlessly about the room, vaguely fiddling at the furniture and ornaments; she could not control her agitation.

John brought in the teapot, and Mrs. Reade peeled her gloves from her small white hands, and rolling them into a

soft ball, tossed them down amongst the cups and saucers. She began to pour out the tea in silence, wondering what in the world she had better do.

The silence was broken by the sound of carriage wheels crunching up the drive. Rachel came to a standstill in the middle of the room, and listened with a rigid intensity of expectation that was quite as painful to her companion as her more demonstrative emotion had been.

They heard the bustle of Mrs. Hardy's arrival, heard John open the front door, heard the sweep of silken draperies in the hall. And then they heard a familiar voice, raised several notes above its ordinary pitch.

"John!"

"Yes'm."

"When did this gentleman call?"

"About an hour after you left'm."

"Did you tell him we were all out?"

"Yes'm. And he'll call again to-morrow, he says."

"Oh, indeed—will he! You'll just tell him, *whenever* he calls, that I am not at home, John—that *nobody* is at home. Do you hear? That gentleman is not to be admitted."

"Oh, you stupid woman!" Mrs. Reade sighed to herself, not meaning to be disrespectful, but grudging to see delicate work marred by inartistic hands.

And then she looked at Rachel, and realised the catastrophe that had occurred. All the colour had gone out of the sensitive face, all its agitation,

all the soft, submissive tenderness that had characterised it hitherto. She looked straight before her, with stern eyes full of indignant passion, and with her lips set in a hard, thin line.

The meek little child, who had been so easy to manage, was going to assert the rights of womanhood, and to take the conduct of her affairs into her own hands.

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE LIGHT THAT NEVER WAS ON SEA OR LAND."

MR. DALRYMPLE was in Melbourne for almost the whole of the time that he had intended to spare from his partner and his property in Queensland, which was nearly three weeks, and he never once succeeded in communicating with Rachel, which was the special mission on which he had come down.

He called at the Toorak house again and again, and was always

told that the ladies were not at home.

There was not much else that he could do at this stage of courtship, knowing nothing of Rachel's circumstances in connection with Mr. Kingston, and having had no definite assurances of her disposition towards himself; but he did this persistently, until he became suddenly aware that Mrs. Hardy did not mean to admit him.

Then he wrote a short note to Mr. Gordon, containing certain instructions in the way of business, and an intimation that he might have to stay in town longer than he had anticipated, and, therefore, was not to be calculated upon at present.

Having despatched which, he addressed himself to the matter he had in hand, with a quiet determination to carry it through, sooner or later, by some means.

It was not his way to plot and scheme clandestinely, but being driven to do it, he did it promptly and with vigour.

He wrote a long letter to Rachel, reviewing with delicate significance the position in which they had stood to one another on the day of their parting at Adelonga, and formally offering himself for her acceptance; and he begged her to appoint some time and place where, if she were willing, she could give herself and him an opportunity for coming to a mutual understanding.

This letter he did not put into the post, being naturally distrustful of Mrs. Hardy, but he carried it in his pocket ready for any chance that might enable him to deliver it with his own hands—for which chance he began to search with diligence in every place of public resort where Rachel would be likely to appear.

Rachel, in the meantime, was distracted with suspense and misery. She saw all possibilities of a legitimate meeting relentlessly and effectually circumvented.

She was kept under such strict surveillance that she did not even see her lover's face, except on one occasion, when she was at the opera, and when, sitting between her aunt

and Mr. Kingston, she was afraid to lift her eyes to look at him.

She could do nothing in her own behalf, while she was uncertain of his intentions. She felt herself more and more hopelessly in the toils of her engagement, as day by day, Mr. Kingston—who yet had mysteriously changed somehow—became more and more obtuse to the state of her mind towards him, and more and more persistently affectionate and amiable, and as day by day, Mrs. Hardy, grown hard and unsympathetic, impressed more and more strongly upon her the fact that she was a penniless and friendless orphan who owed everything that she had to her.

And all the time she loathed the very sound of Mr. Kingston's voice and the very touch of his hand, with an unreasoning passion of repugnance that she had never thought it possible she could feel for one who had been so kind to her; and as a natural consequence — or cause — she was consumed with a sleepless fever of expectation and longing for that other lover whom she loved.

But such a state of things could not last, and after all it came to an end much sooner than either of them expected.

There came a night when Mr. and Mrs. Hardy had to go to a stately dinner party which did not include young girls. A most lovely night it was, in perhaps the loveliest month

of the year, when there was no need to put candles in the carriage lamps, and no need for a fire in the big green drawing-room, where between seven and eight o'clock Rachel was left to amuse herself, in apparent safety, until bed time. A young moon shone in at the open windows before the mellow daylight was gone, as Mrs. Hardy, in rustling silk and tinkling jewels, entered to say good-night.

The evening wind went whispering round the house, ruffling a thousand tufts of bougainvillea that embossed the outer wall, and breathing into the dim room the sweetness of early roses and the fresh fragrance of the sea.

To Rachel, ever afterwards, it was

the most beautiful night that the world had known.

"Now, my dear, John will light the gas for you—two burners will do to-night, John—and you can practise your music undisturbed. Don't leave the windows open any longer; it will be chilly by and bye. And don't sit up late. Good-night."

"Good-night, auntie," responded Rachel.

She proffered the regulation kiss in an absent manner, nodded with a smile to her uncle, who was waiting outside, and stood on the threshold of a French window to watch the carriage until it passed out of the gates and disappeared.

Then instead of going to practise her music, she went out and sat

down on the top of one of the square pedestals that flanked the steps of the terrace upon which the window opened, and clasped her hands about her knees.

John left the window open for her, lit the gas and the piano candles, returned to find her still sitting in the same place, as if she had not stirred, and went away to make his own arrangements for a pleasant evening.

Half an hour later she was wandering about the garden, heedless of the chill that was creeping on with nightfall, and looking before her with eyes so full of dreams that they did not see where she was going to—gliding up and down the level terraces like a ghost in the dusky

twilight, with the silver of the moonshine on her golden hair.

And then, by mere mechanical submission to the force of habit, she found herself presently at that back gate which overlooked "the house," leaning her arms upon the upper rail, and staring at the low ridges of gleaming wall a few dozen yards off, which were rising as it seemed to her, with the rapidity of magic from the foundations that had taken so long to do, the stony embodiment of a relentless fate.

It was very quiet there to-night. No swarms of carpenters, and bricklayers, and stonemasons; no idle boys gaping at them over the fence; no people walking and driving about the road.

She tried the gate, and found it locked; then she climbed lightly over it, and holding up her skirts, stole across the strip of arid waste that lay between it and the nucleus of the building which was once to have been her palace, and now could only be her prison-house, eager to discover anything she could that would indicate the real progress that was being made.

She threaded her course daintily through heaps of brick and stone and broken *débris;* she entered the skeleton house by its gaping porch, and she wandered about the labyrinth of its passages and vestibules, feeling her way with cautious feet and outstretched hands, until she came to her own boudoir; and there she sat down on

a joist of the flooring, and laid her face on her knees and cried.

The sweetness of the solitary night, quite as much as the sight of all those permanently-adjusted ground-floor door and window frames, melted her into these sudden tears, full as she was of the aching rapture of her love and trouble, which needed but a touch to overflow. The possibility of a human spectator of her emotion never for a moment occurred to her.

However, Mr. Roden Dalrymple had also taken it into his head to have an after-dinner walk in the moonlight, and happening for a very good reason, to be prowling about in this neighbourhood, he had seen the slender little figure gliding across the open space between the back gate and the new building,

and he had guessed in a moment whose it was.

And so, as Rachel sat with her feet in subterranean darkness, her hands clasping her knees just above the level of the floor that was to be, and her face hidden in her lap, she heard a sound, suggestive of midnight robbers and murderers, that for a moment paralysed her timid heart; and then a voice, calling her softly,

"Miss Fetherstonhaugh! Do not be frightened. It is only I—Roden Dalrymple."

He came in through the gap of the doorway, while she stared at him and held her breath; he stepped swiftly and lightly from joist to joist until he reached the corner where she was sitting.

Then he sat down beside her quietly, as if he were taking a place she had been keeping for him; and the next moment—with no question asked and no explanation given—they were sealing the most sacred of all contracts irrevocably, in the silence of the solemn night.

It was well for Rachel that, with all his faults, Roden Dalrymple was not the reprobate he was supposed to be, but a man of stainless honour, in whose keeping the welfare of an ignorant and imprudent girl was safe; for—from the day when she went into the conservatory with him in the first hours of their acquaintance, stranger as he was, and she the most modest of girls, simply because he asked her—she had laid herself, metaphorically, at his

feet—too simple and single in all her aims and impulses not to love unreservedly when she began to love at all, too strong in her young enthusiasm for her own ideals to be hampered by doubts either of herself or him, too thoroughly natural and ingenuous to disguise her heart or to bend it to the yoke of conventional law and order.

Now she gave herself up at once, turning to meet his outstretched arms, lifting her face to his strong and eager kisses with a passionate responsiveness and abandonment that, while it infinitely quickened his love and gratitude, showed him plainly that all the responsibility of her future happiness would rest with him.

"Oh," she said, with a long sighing sob, "I have wanted you so!"

"Have you, indeed?" he replied, tightening his arms about her with a gesture that was more significant than speech. "My little love, you shall never want me any more, if I can help it."

These were the terms of their "initial marriage ceremony."

And it is just to Mr. Dalrymple to say that he not only never took the slightest advantage of the irregularities that she innocently allowed, but—at any rate, not until long afterwards—he never even saw them.

That they were candid and truthful in themselves and to one another was from the first the essential bond between them, otherwise unlike as they were; and to him the absence of the usual maidenly reticence and reluctance

displayed on these occasions indicated, all circumstances considered, rather a finer delicacy of nature than the ordinary, and never the faintest suspicion that she held the treasures of love and womanhood cheaply, even for his sake.

Feeling no need of further explanation—understanding one another, by that subtle sense which defies analysis, that instinctive recognition of spiritual kinship which, in its early development, was to them what is called "love at first sight," but which had in it the germs of a true companionship and comradeship that might defy all the accidents of time and chance—they sat for a few blessed silent moments side by side, she with her young head leaning trustfully against

his worn brown face, not wanting to speak, unwilling even to think of all the difficulties that lay in ambush around them, ready to break into this ineffable peace with the breaking of the silence; looking over a low window-sill before them into the quiet night, with grave and happy eyes—at Melbourne, lying in a glorified haze of twilight beneath them, and at the silver of the sea beyond.

CHAPTER IX.

ELEVEN P.M.

"RACHEL," said Mr. Dalrymple presently, speaking her name as if he had had it in familiar use for years, "I suppose you have broken off with *him?*"

Rachel did not reply for a few seconds; he felt her trembling in his arms.

"Oh, forgive me," she whispered, turning her face a hair's-breadth nearer to his as he stooped to listen.

And then she told him all the story of her engagement, as far as her new experiences enabled her to read it, and all the circumstances which had combined to keep her still in captivity so long after she should have been free.

The simple narrative gave even him, who was rather inclined to make mole-hills of mountains, a sense of the difficulties of the situation, that kept him silent for a few minutes in unwonted perplexity of mind.

"How old are you?" he asked abruptly, at last.

"I shall be nineteen in three weeks," she answered.

"You are sure you won't be twenty-one?"

"I'm sure I shan't. Why?"

"Because if you are only nineteen, I cannot carry you off and marry you, love, which would have been the simplest way out of it."

"I should not like that way," whispered Rachel. "It would be a wrong way."

"Yes, dear—except as a last resource. Of course we would try all the other ways first. But we must have our rights, you know. If they won't give them, we must take them—we must get them as we can."

"Cannot we be married until I am twenty-one?" she queried timidly.

"Not without your guardian's consent. Is there any chance of my getting that, or any kind of toleration even, if I call on him at his office to-morrow and use all the eloquence at my command?"

"No. Aunt Elizabeth won't let *him* have anything to do with it."

"If I call on her, then?"

"Oh, no—not the slightest. In the first place, she won't see you. And if she did—oh, no, you must not try—not yet! I think it would make everything worse than it is already."

"Then you see the alternative?—a separation for perhaps two whole years."

"If I know we are going to be so happy at the end of it——"

"Ah—at the end of it! It will be a fine test for you, Rachel."

"Why for me, any more than for you? Oh, don't talk of tests!" she pleaded; "I only want to feel sure I shall never lose you, and I

don't mind waiting two years. If only——"

"If only what?"

"If only Mr. Kingston would go away!"

"Now listen to me," he said gently, but with his grave peremptoriness, "you must not let another day pass without breaking off with him. You must *send* him away, Rachel. I am sorry for him, poor devil, but you couldn't do him a worse wrong than let him go on deceiving himself about you."

"Oh, do you think I would do that? Of course I will not. I can do it *now* —now that you have come. For now I shall feel strong, and now I can tell them why. I shall write him a letter before I go to bed, and I shall tell

Aunt Elizabeth as soon as I have sent it. But what will they say to me? It will be dreadful."

"Poor little woman! Can't I take the dreadful part of it for you? *I* shan't mind it."

"You can't. I know it will be better for us both if you will not have anything to do with it just yet."

"I think I *must* see your uncle, dear, before I go away again."

"Well—if you think it best. But it will do no good with Aunt Elizabeth. He leaves it all to her."

Mr. Dalrymple gazed thoughtfully at the distant horizon, where little points of yellow twinkled in the silvery obscurity of the moonshiny bay.

He was deeply troubled and perplexed about this tender little creature, and

the idea of leaving her to bear the brunt of unknown trials for his sake, seemed too preposterous to be taken seriously. And yet what else could he do?

"Tell me," he said presently, stroking her silky head as it lay on his breast, "tell me what is the worst that can happen to you, Rachel?"

"The worst," sighed Rachel, "will be hearing Aunt Elizabeth tell me that I have repaid all her generosity and kindness to me with ingratitude and treachery."

"That will be very bad. But you will have to try and make her understand the real right and justice of it, love. She must see it, unless she is stone blind. She can't expect us to outrage all the laws of nature to suit

her narrow schemes. You don't think there will be anything still worse?—that she will make your life wretched by making you feel your dependence—that kind of thing?"

"I am not sure," said Rachel. "She has been very, very good to me; but lately—since she has got suspicious about you—she has been hard. However, if the worst comes to the worst, I can go and be a governess or companion somewhere until you are ready for me."

"No, Rachel, no; you must promise to tell me if you are persecuted in any way—if you are miserable in your aunt's house—and my sister Lily will take care of you. You are not to let the worst come to the worst—do you hear? You must let me know of anything that

happens, and I will come at once and see about it. Oh, my poor little one, I begin to realise what sacrifices you will have to make for me! Will you think the game was worth the candle, I wonder, when you are as old as I am?"

"Yes," said Rachel; "I know I shall —if you will be as contented with me then as you are now."

"Do you *really* think you have counted the cost?" he persisted anxiously. "Remember, you were going to marry Mr. Kingston, because you thought it would be nice to be rich and to live in a grand house and to wear diamonds."

"That was before I had seen *you*. I don't want to be rich now. Indeed, I would rather not."

"Has anybody told you how poor I am?"

"Yes," she whispered, stealing a timid hand to his shoulder. "I have been thinking of it. Beatrice says it is a mistake for poor men to marry—that they cripple their career. But I hope —I think—*I* shall not be any burden to you. Once I was poor, too, and I know all about it, and I can manage with a very little. I think I could help you in lots of ways, and not be a hindrance."

"A hindrance, indeed!" he interrupted. "My darling, if I had you for my companion, life would be sweet enough for me, under any circumstances. It was your comfort and happiness I was thinking of."

"I only want to be with you," she said,

under her breath. "I don't care where—I don't care how."

"*Really*, Rachel?"

"Really, indeed."

"You are so young! Think what a number of years you have before you, in all probability. If you should lose the colour out of your life too soon, if you should have to drudge—but I won't let you drudge," he added, with a sudden touch of fierceness, "I will take care of you, and you shall have all you want. It *won't* be a sacrifice — not even all this"—looking round him— "if you give it up for a man you love, who has health and strength to work for you. It would make you miserable if you had it. You know it would?"

"I do know it," she responded, without a moment's hesitation.

She had finally made up her mind that after all material poverty was not the worst of life's misfortunes. Indeed, provided the element of debt were absent, she thought it might in Roden Dalrymple's company, "far from the madding crowd," in the lonely wilds of Queensland, be rather pleasant than otherwise; for it would mean the delight of working for and helping one another, and a blessed freedom from interruption and restraint in the enjoyment of that wonderful married life which would be theirs.

"But I should like to know what made you take to me," he went on, in the immemorial fashion, stroking her soft face. "I should like to know why you chose, for your first love —I am your first, am I not, Rachel?"

"You *know* you are. And it was no matter of choice with me—you know that, too."

"A man who made shipwreck of his fortunes for another woman almost before you were born——"

"Hush!" interrupted Rachel. "I have no rights in your past, and I don't want any. This present is mine, and that is enough for me."

"A battered old vagabond——"

"No," she persisted; "I won't allow you to call yourself a vagabond. It is bad enough to hear other people do it."

"After seeing him under what one would be inclined to consider, well, anything but favourable auspices—for how many days, Rachel?"

"Oh," she said, hiding a scarlet

face, "don't remind me of that! It was too soon—but I could not help it."

"The sooner the better, my sweet—if it lasts," he responded, kissing her with solemn passion; "and I will *make* it last."

"Do not be afraid of that," she whispered eagerly. "I know I am young—I know one ought not to be too positive about the future—but I *feel* that it will be impossible to help loving you always, even if I try not to, which I certainly shan't. I am sure I began it when I saw you riding across the racecourse that day—I am sure I shall not stop any more as long as I live. I don't think there can be another man in the world like you."

And so they talked, until it occurred

to one of them to wonder what the time was. Mr. Dalrymple struck a match and looked at his watch, Rachel shielding the small flame from the wind with her hand.

"Oh," she exclaimed in dismay, "what would Aunt Elizabeth say if she knew I was sitting out here at eleven o'clock at night!"

"Call it eleven p.m.," he suggested, looking at her with his slow smile; "that sounds so much better."

"Did you think it was so late? The time has flown."

"I *felt* it flying," he replied. "But I did not think it was so late. I'm afraid you must go home, little one. Oh, dear me, when shall we have such a time again! Will you come here to-morrow night, and tell me

how you have got over your day's troubles ?"

This was not a proposal that Rachel could accept comfortably, nor that he could bring himself to press upon her. But when they came to reconsider their position and necessities, it was hard to find an alternative.

"You see, I must go back to Queensland in a day or two," Mr. Dalrymple explained, when, having taken her out of her hole and dusted her skirts with his handkerchief, he led her through the labyrinth of walls into the open moonlight, and they paused, hand in hand, for a few last words. "We have an immense deal to do up there, and Gordon wants me. I must look after getting things together for you too. There is not even a roof for your head

yet. But I can't bear to leave town without knowing first how matters are likely to go with you."

"If you *should* be obliged to do that —if I *cannot* see you again," said Rachel, "when will you come back?"

"I will come back in—let me see, this is October—in two months. I will be back at Christmas. I should have liked to see your uncle to-morrow, just that there should be no mistake about what I mean to do; but if you think it will make things harder for you, I won't, of course. You shall just tell Kingston what you like, and the rest of them I will enlighten when I come. By that time he will be out of the way and done with, and we shall have a straight road before us."

"Yes," said Rachel, sighing; "I think that will be best. And perhaps, by that time, Aunt Elizabeth will let you in."

"If she doesn't, I shall bombard the house."

"You will be *sure* to be back at Christmas?"

"If I am alive, dear, and a free agent—certainly. And I shall find you ready for me then?"

"Oh, yes!"

With this compact between them, and the giving to Rachel of her lover's town address, and very explicit directions as to where she might find him at any given hour when she might happen to want him until the day of his departure, they kissed one clinging, lingering kiss in motionless silence, and bade one another—

though they did not know it—a long farewell.

"Which is your window, Rachel? Can I see it from here?"

She pointed to it in silence, it was very distinct just now in the moonshine, between two dark pine trees. She was crying a little, and she could not speak.

"I will be here to-morrow night," he said; "and if you *can't* come out to me, have a light in your room at twelve o'clock, darling, to let me know you are all right."

And then they separated; and Rachel felt rather than saw her way home, so dazzled with tears was she, while Roden Dalrymple at her desire remained behind and watched her.

She went straight into the house and

upstairs to her room, to gather together, in a feverish hurry of renunciation, all her diamonds and jewels, which like Dead Sea apples, had suddenly become dust.

And he, long after she was gone,—long after Mrs. Hardy's carriage returned, and all the chimes in the city had rung the midnight hour—lingered where she had left him, leaning his arms on a convenient wall, watching a lighted window, and thinking. He was very happy. He had come unawares upon his happiness, when he was most in need of it, and it seemed to him that it was the best he could have had.

Anything sweeter than this fresh and simple heart, which was satisfied to invest all its wealth in him—

anything brighter than the future she had spread before him—he did not want or wish for. It was the amplest compensation that he could imagine for the mistakes and disappointments of his wasted past.

And yet, though he was hardly conscious of it—though he would not have owned to it if he had been—he had a vague misgiving about her. He did not wish that she had been less easy to win; he had no fear that she was mistaking a sentimental girlish fancy for love; he did not for a moment apprehend that she would forsake or wrong him.

But there was a suggestion of untried and untested youth about all the circumstances of this sudden betrothal, as far as she had influenced them, and there

was an intangible suspicion that somewhere she was weak.

He did not recognise, and therefore did not formulate, the sentiment that infused that touch of grave and sad anxiety into his happy meditations; but, nevertheless, it was there, and the time came when it was justified.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. READE'S ADVICE.

RACHEL was not a heroine. She was simply a sweet and interesting girl; except that she was unusually pretty, by no means above the ordinary level of nice girls. She was better than a great many that we are acquainted with, no doubt, but she was not so good as some.

And she had, as has been already indicated, that fault which, of all

faults, perhaps, is most common to girls, whether nice or otherwise—that amiable weakness that is more disastrous in its consequences than many a downright vice—she was, if not quite a coward, cowardly.

She was afraid to meet difficulties in the open, as it were—to attack the main body and scatter them, and have done with it; she sheltered herself in ambush, and made desultory attacks on flank and rear with temporary compromises, hating the thought of duplicity and longing to do right, yet most of all dreading the violent, harsh hurt to tender sensibilities (whether her own or other people's) that was inevitable in the shock of a pitched battle.

It is a defect in a woman's character

very much to be deplored, of course, and it is one that seems unpardonable to a strong-minded person.

Nevertheless, it is much more of a misfortune than a fault (and we may as well say the same, while we are about it, of all our constitutional defects, from red hair to kleptomania, since we did not choose our parents nor the social conditions to which we were born); and to Rachel, whose instinctive truthfulness and high sense of moral rectitude prompted her to struggle hard, if vainly, against it, it was purely a misfortune, and at no time in her life more so than now.

For, after turning the question over and over in her mind through all that feverish and wakeful night, she finally

decided that in breaking off her engagement with Mr. Kingston she would not mention, either to him or to anyone else, the place that Mr. Dalrymple now occupied in her affections and affairs.

As no one was aware of their having met, and as he was coming back himself so soon to clear up everything much better than she could, she persuaded herself that it would be not only unnecessary, but in the highest degree inexpedient, to aggravate the inevitable pain and difficulty that was before her and all of them.

Hating his very name as they did, would she not expose her lover to insult, and his motives and actions to misconception, and probably pre-

judice their chances of happiness irrevocably?

And at the same time do no good whatever, but only add an element of unspeakable bitterness to the disappointment of her aunt, and to the mortification of her already ill-used and much-wronged *fiancé*, and, as a matter of detail, an incalculable amount of difficulty to her own sufficiently formidable task? She was certain that she would, and she felt that she could not, and need not do it.

It took her all night to mature her course of action, but having finally brought herself to believe that it was not only so much the easiest to herself, but in every way the best for all concerned, to ignore Mr. Dalrymple for the present, she com-

mitted herself to it by writing a long letter to Mr. Kingston—a tender, penitent, self-accusing letter, in which she begged him to forgive her for having discovered so much too late that they were unsuited to one another, and prayed that he might some day be happier with a better woman than it was in her power to make him, and that he would ever believe her his attached and grateful friend, without suggesting the existence or possibility of any other lover, present or to be.

The natural results followed. Mr. Kingston, seeing no sufficient reason for these sudden strong measures, refused to treat them seriously.

He was quite aware, and it troubled him deeply, that she was not happy in her engagement, and he was very

jealous and suspicious of Mr. Dalrymple, whom he had seen once or twice about town; but he had set his heart upon her, as we say, with the perverse obstinacy of a fickle man who had been spoiled by women's flattery, and the more she seemed to shrink from him the more he wanted to have her, and the more he was determined not to let her go if he could possibly help it.

His love not only lacked reciprocity —without which love is never worthy to be spelt with a capital L—but it was so diluted with all sorts of vanities and egotisms that, though its flavour was there, the potent spirit was absent, and he was incapable of making a sacrifice for her happiness at the expense of his own.

When he solemnly assured himself that he loved her as he had never loved anyone before, and that he could not and would not give her up—when he declared, moreover, that he was ready to spend his future life in her service, and would take his chance of making her care for him—he not only told the truth, as far as he understood it, but perhaps he touched the highest point of heroism of which his selfish nature was capable.

All the same, the strong necessities of the case were the carrying out of the great enterprise which was symbolised by the half-built house, and the realisation of his schemes for his own enjoyment; the possession (and the securing from other men) of the most attractive, the most admired,

and to him most loveable woman of his set, who had so to speak given him a legal lien upon her person; the maintenance of his social position and dignity, and the avoidance of ridicule and embarrassment.

So when he had read Rachel's letter, with a great expense of bad language in the first place, and of wise reflection subsequently, he made up his mind that it was merely the result of their Adelonga differences, which had been rankling in her sensitive heart, and not the formal resignation that he would be required to accept.

"No, no, young lady," he said to himself, as he made a careful toilet before setting forth to see her, "I have not sacrificed my liberty and all my comfortable habits, at your in-

stigation and for your sake, to take my *congé* at the eleventh hour in this way."

And then he cast about in his mind anxiously for ways and means whereby he might meet and overcome this strange reluctance, which not only seemed to him a cruel injury and injustice after all he had done for her, but really distressed him acutely, and made him extremely unhappy.

Was there anything amongst Kilpatrick's glittering treasures that would tempt her to smile and kiss him, and be sorry that she had given him this heartless blow?

He felt to-day that he would spend a thousand pounds cheerfully for anything that would please her.

But at the same time he was

uneasily conscious that even the largest and purest diamonds would not appreciably affect the situation.

She was no longer open to these fascinations, as she used to be; several little circumstances had convinced him of that.

It was a bad sign, he feared; but he hoped it indicated nothing more serious than that the novelty of wealth and luxury had worn off.

He recognised its existence so far that he went on his delicate mission to Toorak, trusting to his own merits and eloquence, with no bribes of any sort in his pocket.

After all, he did not see Rachel that day. She was weeping hysterically in her bedroom at the top of the house, and therefore was not presentable.

Mrs. Hardy, much excited and discomposed by the shock she had just received (on being told by Rachel that she had not only written a letter to her *fiancé*, to break off her engagement, but had *sent* it), received him in the drawing-room, and did the best that wisdom, at such short notice, suggested to repair the catastrophe which she had been powerless to prevent.

She tried to smile and joke, in a considerate and well-bred manner; she rallied him upon his misconduct in the matter of Miss Hale, which had evidently been at the bottom of all the mischief, gently pointing out to him that a sensitive nature like Rachel's, and a tender heart that loved and trusted him, could not be played with,

even in the conventional fashion, with impunity.

And then she hastened to explain the suddenness and unexpectedness of this "freak;" how sure she was that it had been perpetrated under the influence of a fit of temper or dejection, or some other unhealthy condition of mind; how equally sure she was that it was already repented of—though, of course, it was not for her to give an opinion or to interfere. All of which would have been very proper and sensible, but that the effect was marred by a bubbling under-current of angry excitement that her utmost efforts could not hide.

Mr. Kingston watched and listened, with smiling self-possession. Finding that he was not to see Rachel, nor to

get any fresh information, he did not prolong the interview. He had no confidence in Mrs. Hardy—few men had, in matters of this kind. He received her communications in a friendly manner, as one receives an embassy under a flag of truce; he never thought of allowing himself to be influenced by them one way or the other, or of asking her assistance and advice.

As soon as courtesy permitted, he bowed himself out of her presence, with magnanimous expressions of good-will and a request that nothing might be be said or done to distress or embarrass Rachel. And then he got into his cab thoughtfully, and went to South Yarra to call on Mrs. Reade.

It was not one of this young lady's reception days, as no one knew better

than himself; nor had she left her house in pursuit of tea and gossip at other people's "afternoons," as he half expected would be the case.

The sprightly maid-servant (all Mrs. Reade's servants were maids, and all of them sprightly), who opened the door to his thundering knock, recognising a privileged friend of the family, admitted him with alacrity; and he walked into the drawing-room and found his hostess sitting there alone, nestling in one of her seductive low chairs with an open letter on her knee.

She, too, had just received the news of Rachel's escapade; the letter, full of dashing and incoherent sentences, was in Mrs. Hardy's handwriting, and had arrived half an hour ago from Toorak. But there were no signs of

excitement and discomposure about this little person, who rose to meet him, looking cool and bright, with even the suspicion of a twinkle in her eyes.

"Have you come for a gossip?" she asked, looking up at him with friendly frankness. "Because if you have you had better send your cab away. I am going out at five o'clock, and I'll drive you into town."

The cab was sent away; and Mr. Kingston, with a feeling of comfort and safety about him, sat down in a bow-windowed recess, in his favourite of all the cunningly-devised chairs, and with his elbows on his knees, began to fiddle with the top of a silk sock, at the toe of which his companion was now knitting industriously.

"Is this for Ned?" he inquired, after a pause.

"Now, isn't that a superfluous question?" she replied, holding it up. "Look at the size of it. Could any foot but his fill out that enormous bag? Of course it is for Ned. Don't you know it is the new fashion for wives to knit their husband's socks? One must be in the fashion, even if one's husband is a giant."

"Very nice for one's husband. It seems beautifully soft; pretty colour, too." Then, after a pause, "Does Rachel know how to knit?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Reade, calmly; "we both learned together while she was staying with me, and she does it much quicker than I do. I suppose you are thinking you would like to

participate in the benefits of the fashion too?" she added, lifting her face suddenly, with a quick look in her bright eyes that was like the opening of a masked battery.

"If I thought that Rachel would ever knit socks for me, for the pleasure of it——" He paused with a change and break in his voice, regarding her wistfully.

Mrs. Reade immediately made a sheaf of her needles, wound them up in the sock, and impaled her ball of silk upon them. "Tell me," she said, folding her hands on her knees in a business-like manner, "tell me, what has Rachel been doing?"

"Don't you know? She has written to me to break off our engagement."

"What for?"

"I can't imagine—she doesn't say. I thought *you* might be able to help me to find that out."

Mrs. Reade looked at him in silence for a few seconds, kindly and gravely. Even she felt herself a little at a loss as to what course to pursue.

"What have you done?" she asked abruptly.

"Nothing. I went up to see her just now, but I was disappointed. She could not, or would not, come in. I rather fancy your mother had been scolding her."

"I have no doubt she had. She doesn't approve of independence on the part of young people."

"I won't have her scolded," Mr. Kingston broke out, with sudden vehemence. "If I like to blame her,

that is another matter. I won't have her set against me by other people. Nothing would make her hate me more than that kind of thing."

Mrs. Reade felt the justice of this protest, but she did not see fit to discuss her mother's little mistakes. "What are you going to do?" she inquired.

"Do you mean am I going to take my dismissal in this off-hand way? No, certainly not. After all the time we have been engaged—after all that has come and gone between us—after all the preparations that have been made—it would be *too* preposterous! I should be the laughing-stock of the colony."

"That would be very sad," said Mrs. Reade, with her head on one side.

"Now be a good little woman, and don't jeer at me—I didn't come to you for that. You know—or you ought to know—that I am horribly upset and miserable about all this business, and that I want you to help me."

"I don't see how I can help you," she said.

"Tell me about Rachel. What is the matter with her? What does she mean?"

"Well, evidently she means that she doesn't want to marry you," sighed Mrs. Reade. "Tiresome child, why didn't she think of it before?"

"Why should she think of it now? Oh, yes, I know she has not been keen about it for some time, as she should have been. But she has not seemed to *dislike* it; she has looked forward to

it as as much a matter of course as —as it has been to all the rest of us. And I felt so sure it would be all right—that I could make her as happy as possible — when we were once married and she had settled down!"

It was not often that Mrs. Reade was perplexed, but now—between her duty to her family, her strong affection for Rachel, and her desire to assist her friend—she really did not know what to do. While she was silent, struggling with the dilemma in her active mind, Mr. Kingston went on.

"It is since she went to Adelonga that she has changed so much. Haven't you noticed?"

"You did not behave very well to her at Adelonga, you know."

"Who told you that? Did she?"

"Never mind who told me. There is never any secrecy about your proceedings — I will give you that credit. You treated her very badly at Lucilla's ball."

"Not worse than she treated me," he began, impetuously; and then he paused and looked at his hostess. He was gentleman enough to shrink from discussing Rachel's misdeeds in connection with "that Dalrymple fellow," but he longed to find out how much her wise cousin and late companion knew. Mrs. Reade fingered her knitting with a placid and impenetrable face.

"Tell me—you know Rachel so intimately—do you think——"

"Do I think what?"

"That there is anyone she cares for—more than she cares for me?"

He was impelled, against his better judgment, to ask this awkward question. Mrs. Reade gathered herself together, so to speak; it was one of those sudden emergencies that inspire a brave woman.

"If I thought she cared for anyone who was a better man, and could make her happier than you," she said deliberately, looking him straight in the face, "she should have him, or it would not be my fault."

"But she does not?"

"So far as I know she does not. But," she was an honest little woman, and it gave her a pang to mislead him, even though she did it for what seemed to her a good end, "but, at

the same time, no doubt she does not care for you as she ought to do."

"I hope that will come," he said cheerfully."

If only Mr. Dalrymple did not stand in his way, he felt all difficulties manageable.

"It is a great risk; you ought to think well before you take it."

"I have thought well."

"And I will be no party to making *her* take it against her will."

"But I think she will be willing if she is treated properly. Of course I don't want to marry her by force. I want to bring her round to like it as she used to like it. If there is nobody else, why not? And you *will* help me, won't you?"

Mrs. Reade looked at him with bright and friendly eyes. He was really taking it very well considering how badly he had been treated, and how extremely susceptible he was to indignities of this, or indeed any description. He certainly must be strangely in love with that perverse child, she thought —much more in love than she had ever expected to see him—to be able to put his wrongs in the background like this. He deserved to be helped.

And as far as human judgment was to be trusted, to help him would be to play Providence to Rachel.

"I will do what I can," she said kindly. "That is to say, I won't interfere, but I'll give you good advice whenever you do me the honour to ask for it."

"Thank you; I ask for it now. What do you advise me to do?"

She pondered a few moments, watching him thoughtfully.

"You are quite sure, once for all, that you think it worth while to throw yourself away on an ungrateful little monkey who doesn't appreciate you?"

"I'm quite sure I want to marry Rachel. I hope she will appreciate me, but if she doesn't—well, I want to marry her all the same."

"And are willing to take the consequences?"

"Oh, yes; I'm not afraid of consequences—once the wedding is over."

He smiled as he made this almost sacrilegious assertion, which implied a marital control of consequences that was

offensive in the ears of the little woman, who liked to see husbands kept in their proper places.

"Don't boast," she said sharply, "you might find yourself in a very unpleasant position when the wedding was over. And you will, too, if you don't mind."

The dialogue was interrupted at this point. A little brougham rattled past the window on its way from the stable-yard to the front-door, and a servant came in with tea.

Mrs. Reade looked at her watch, and her guest's face fell.

"Is it five o'clock?" he exclaimed testily; "and you have not given me any advice!"

"Will you have a cup of tea?" she inquired, coolly.

"No, thank you. *Must* you go out this afternoon?"

"Well, I could hardly countermand the carriage now, because you are here, could I? We'll have a drive somewhere before we go in to town, and I'll give you advice as we go along."

She drank her tea standing in the middle of the room, and then leaving him to fret and fume by himself, went away to dress, and in the retirement of her own apartment to concoct a definite scheme of action.

In a few minutes she came back alert and bright, in a very charming French bonnet, and with yards of silken train behind her. She was ready for him in every sense of the word.

As soon as they were out upon the

road, and she had finished buttoning a refractory glove, she said gravely, with an air of having solved all doubts,

"Now I will tell you what you must do."

"Yes ?"

"You must accept Rachel's dismissal."

"*What!* I'm sure I shall not do anything of the kind."

Mrs. Reade laid herself back in the carriage and folded her hands.

"Very well," she said, calmly.

"No, but really—I beg your pardon—I don't understand you. Do you mean I must just give her up and have done with it? Because you know it is just that that I can't do."

"Not at all. But don't ask my opinion——"

"Oh, yes, *do* tell me what you mean."

"Well, I was going to suggest that you see or write to Rachel and tell her you will do what she wishes rather than distress her; but that, while leaving her free, you will consider yourself still as much bound to her as ever, and wait in hope that she will come back to you some day. That kind of thing, you know."

"Oh, yes, that is all very well. And in the meantime I shall be getting old—that is to say, I shall be losing time—and she will be sure to be run after by other men the moment my back is turned."

"It will be better to lose a little time than to worry her now," said Mrs. Reade. "If you draw off from her a little, she will miss you, and then pro-

bably she will want you, and provided you left her assured of your faithfulness, and didn't go flirting with Miss Hales and people, it would be just the kind of delicate and chivalrous consideration for her that she would appreciate. Yes, I know Rachel; it would touch her heart deeply."

"But some other fellow might get hold of her—finding she was free, you know."

"I think," said Mrs. Reade, smiling slightly, "that we may safely leave my mother to look after that."

Upon consideration Mr. Kingston thought so too. He began to see glimmerings of wisdom and reason in this proposed course.

"But your mother will have to be looked after herself," he said, breaking

a little pause abruptly. "If *I* am not to worry Rachel, nobody else shall."

"Of course. I will look after my mother."

"And suppose," he continued presently, deep in troubled thoughts, "suppose she never renews the engagement after all?"

"Oh, well—suppose the world comes to an end to-morrow—we can't help it!"

"Do you think she will?"

"I do think she will—honestly, I do—if you are patient and gentle, and do as I tell you. She will be dull and lonely; she will miss you about her, and not only you, but many pleasant things that are associated with you; she will bethink herself that she has treated you badly—as indeed she

has—and she is so tender-hearted that it will fret her. And if she sees you occasionally, not in season and out of season, but now and then, at opportune times, and you do her little voluntary services in a delicate and unobtrusive way—then some of these days, seeing you still, she will suddenly think that she loves you, and—well, then it will be all right, you know."

"Oh, I hope so!" he broke out, with a deep, impatient sigh—though it was not a great deal to hope for when it came to be reckoned up. "But how long will she be reaching that point?"

"It depends."

"And we were to have been married in a couple of months—three at the most. Upon my honour, it *is* too bad!"

"I shouldn't be surprised if you were married quite as soon as you arranged to be," Mrs. Reade proceeded calmly, building this comfortable theory upon the conviction that Mr. Dalrymple, in spite of his persistence in calling at Toorak, was not the kind of man to remain faithful to a ball-room fancy, nor to undertake anything so expensive and so respectable as matrimony under the most favourable conjunction of circumstances; and feeling sure that Rachel, with her clinging, impulsive nature, finding her desires frustrated in this direction, would be under an imperious necessity to seek—or, at any rate, to accept—support elsewhere. "If I had her with me for six weeks, I think I would not mind risking a small bet——"

"*Can't* you have her with you?" Mr. Kingston interposed eagerly.

"No, I fear not. My mother would not consent to let her go from home just now. The situation is too grave. But even as things are, if you manage the child properly, I don't at all despair of seeing you married—or, at any rate, engaged again—before the year is out. Very far from it."

"I would give a thousand pounds at this moment if I could be certain that that would be," sighed Mr. Kingston, plaintively.

"Only you must do what I tell you. I assure you, if you *want* to succeed, that is your best, if not your only chance. Will you do what I tell you?"

"I will see Rachel first."

"Of course. See her and give her plainly to understand what a pain and and disappointment it is to you to give her up, and that you only do it for her sake. Perhaps, if you talk it over with her, she will cancel her letter, and it will be all right at once; in which case you had better arrange for your marriage as quickly as possible. But if it should be otherwise—if she should still press for a dissolution of her engagement—let her go for a little while. It need not be for long."

"I think I will," said Mr. Kingston, thoughtfully. And he did.

CHAPTER XI.

UNTIL CHRISTMAS.

MRS. READE was accustomed not only to give advice and to see it taken, but to see the wisdom of it justified in the success of its practical application.

Nevertheless, she was more surprised than Mr. Kingston himself at the great and good results which apparently followed her interference in his affairs. Matters were a little critical for a week or two.

Of course he "saw" Rachel, and attacked the position which she had taken up with all the forces at his command. He was, in his Mentor's judgment, indiscreetly zealous and persevering; and the almost fierce obstinacy of Rachel's resistance, which neither science nor brute force could overcome, being an altogether anomalous demonstration of character, was even more portentous.

But when presently Mr. Kingston, in a dignified and graceful letter, accepted his defeat, while at the same time clearly intimating that the withdrawal of his former pretensions in no way indicated any change in his affections and fidelity, then everything seemed to go well.

The girl *was* touched and grieved to

the depths of her tender heart for the wrong and the trouble that she had inflicted upon him, and was in agonies of anxiety for his welfare.

"Do you think he will go back to Miss Brownlow?" she inquired one day of Beatrice, with pathetic eyes full of tears; "and, oh, *do* you think she will make him happy?"

She was terribly taken aback when her cousin with much asperity upbraided her with the heartlessness of the suggestion.

For a little while, having received her aunt's grudging acquiescence in the dissolution of her engagement, having sent back all her jewels, having surreptitiously despatched a note to her lover in Queensland (which she implored him not to answer) to tell him that she was

honourably free, and living in the anticipation of his return, Rachel began to blossom in beauty and brightness again, like a flower that night had chilled in the warmth of morning sunshine.

It was, perhaps, a little discouraging to see how very much relieved and refreshed she was in her freedom—that she did not even hanker after her lost diamonds, and the riches and luxuries that had once been so desirable and so precious; but Mrs. Reade, as was her custom, looked below the surface of things, and found her compensations.

That the girl had recovered her balance, so to speak, and was in sound health, mentally and physically, was of the first importance in this sensible

young woman's view of the case; and her eager friendliness to Mr. Kingston whenever she met him—eager in proportion to the modesty of his demands of course, and sometimes warm with impulsive tenderness such as she had never voluntarily manifested in the days of her engagement—seemed to foreshadow the most hopeful possibilities. Indeed, if Mr. Kingston behaved well, Rachel, apart from her specific misdemeanour, behaved even better.

Mrs. Hardy, outwardly conforming to her daughter's scheme, would not, or could not, disguise her resentment at the failure of the original enterprise, and visited it upon the girl, as perhaps was natural, more roughly than she would have done had Rachel been her

own child or less deeply indebted to her.

She was ostentatiously cold and indifferent, or she was sarcastic, and harsh, and rude; she was rigorous to the verge of tyranny in her determination to allow no other man the smallest opportunity for improving the occasion in the manner that Mr. Kingston had indicated—withdrawing her niece from all the gay assemblies where she had hitherto disported herself with so much enjoyment and *éclat*, and keeping her to a petty routine of study and household duties that was made as dull and irksome as possible.

Yet Rachel, always so sensitive to both kindness and unkindness, and as much hurt by a snub as she would

have been by a blow, took it all with the sweetest patience and temper.

She devoted herself to her aunt's service as she never had done before, compassing the sombre woman with every possible delicate attention that tact and thoughtfulness could devise; and she not only persevered in this amiable conduct, but kept a certain placid and gentle brightness about her, under all discouragements, for weeks and weeks together.

Mrs. Reade, as a matter of course, was greatly touched and pleased; for it was evident—as far as her sharp eyes could see—that Mr. Dalrymple was not the source of inspiration *now*, seeing that he had been effectually circumvented on his first attempt to renew her acquaintance, and had never

been seen or heard of since. It seemed to the anxious little woman that the girl had only wanted her freedom for awhile, and that, by and bye, by the mere drift of the current, she would be borne back to the arms that were waiting for her.

Things seemed to be going on so well that Mrs. Reade, when the gaieties of the "Cup" season were over, thought she might venture to leave town for a few weeks. She wanted very much to pay a long-deferred visit to Adelonga.

She had not been there since Lucilla was a bride, and of course she had not seen the baby. She was also anxious to find out for herself "the rights" of the story that her mother had told her concerning Rachel's conduct and experiences while sojourning under

her sister's roof, and if possible to make the acquaintance of some of Mr. Dalrymple's people.

So, with customary promptitude, she made her preparations. She sent for Mr. Kingston and gave him judicious advice and encouragement to direct and uphold him in her absence.

Then she interviewed Mrs. Hardy, and expressed herself so strongly on behalf of her own views as to what was right and proper in the management of Rachel's case, that they nearly came to "words."

And, finally, having fortified the position to the best of her power, she sought out Rachel herself, and, in the privacy of that little chamber at the top of the house, bade her an affectionate and reluctant good-bye.

"I don't know if my mother has told you, dear, that Lucilla wanted me very much to bring you with me," she said, when they were sitting together by Rachel's window, hand in hand.

"Did she? Dear Lucilla, how I should like to see her!" ejaculated Rachel, but not in the tone of voice that Mrs. Reade had expected.

"And I begged very hard for permission, but mamma thought it better not to interrupt your music and painting lessons again so soon. It is a great disappointment to you not to go, isn't it? At first I thought I would not tell you anything about it."

"Ah, but I am glad you told me," said Rachel; "for I must send a mes-

sage to Lucilla to thank her. She knows how I loved to be at Adelonga—I think it is the sweetest place in the wide world."

"I wish I could take you," said Mrs. Reade; "but——"

"Oh, no, Beatrice, I cannot go, I know. Indeed, I would rather not. I would rather stay with Aunt Elizabeth, and go on with my lessons."

Mrs. Reade was considerably astonished and disconcerted by this evidently genuine sentiment. There was *something* in so ready a relinquishment of the pleasures of Adelonga, which had always been so great, and also in the tremulous eagerness with which the girl put the proposal from her—a proposal which Mrs. Reade had feared would be cruelly tantalising

at this time; but it was not immediately apparent.

Rachel could not stand the silent scrutiny of her cousin's brilliant eyes. Blushing violently, she rose from the couch on which she had been sitting, and rested her arms on the window-sill, and looked out upon the sombre pine trees that stood perfectly motionless in the golden summer air.

"Do you see how that house is getting on?" she said, breaking an awkward pause. "The walls are simply *rushing* up. They will be ready for the roof directly."

Mrs. Reade stood on tiptoe and peeped over her shoulder.

"I wonder you have the heart to look at it," she replied.

"Oh, Beatrice!"

"I do, when you think what a wreck you have made of all the hopes and plans that that poor dear man has been building with it."

"He will build some more, and better ones, by and bye, I hope."

"Not he. Men don't do that so easily at his age."

"Oh, yes," she persisted, imploringly, "I think he will, indeed. He did it very easily with me."

"For an exceedingly good reason —because he loved you from the first. Oh, you ungrateful little monkey, it's to be hoped you'll die an ugly old maid!"

"That would be better than being the wife for years and years of a man I did not love."

"Rubbish. As if one could have everything all at once in this world. You girls think of nothing but yourselves. You don't take into account that it might be worth while to make somebody else happy."

"How could I make him happy unless I loved him, Beatrice?"

"Oh, don't talk about it. You have pleased yourself, I suppose, and he must do the best he can. He is terribly miserable as he is, poor fellow; but I daresay he'll get over it."

"Is he miserable *now?*" inquired Rachel anxiously. "Have you seen him lately?"

"I saw him yesterday, and he told me that his life had no value for him now that he had lost you, and that he

should never live in his house unless you were the mistress of it. I shouldn't imagine he felt particularly jolly under those circumstances. However, it is no use worrying ourselves on his account," the little woman added cheerfully, seeing tears in her cousin's gentle eyes.

"But I am so sorry for him!"

"That won't help him much, my dear. And if *you* are happy, I suppose that is all we need care about."

"Oh, no, Beatrice!"

"We haven't time to fret over other people's troubles," Mrs. Reade proceeded, in what Rachel thought an exceedingly heartless manner; "life is too short."

"But, Beatrice——"

"Now, I can't talk about Mr. Kingston any more. I have all my packing to do yet, and I must run away and see after it. Good-bye, dearest child. Mind you write often. I wish you were going with me —I can't bear to leave you behind."

Rachel flung her arms round her small cousin with characteristic fervour.

"When do you think you will come home again?" she inquired tremulously, almost in a whisper.

"I can't say, dear, exactly."

"Before Christmas, won't you?"

"I think so; it will all depend on circumstances."

"Oh, *do* be back by Christmas," Rachel pleaded, with an almost tragic

eagerness. "It would be dreadful if Christmas came and you were so far away!"

"Am I so necessary to the festivities of the season?" laughed Mrs. Reade, much touched and flattered. "Well, I'll see what I can do. Suppose I try and bring Lucilla and the children back, and make a regular family gathering of it?"

"Oh, if you *could!*" sighed Rachel.

All the terrors of her time of trial would be gone, she thought, if she could have these two faithful cousins beside her.

So Mrs. Reade went off by the morning train, tolerably easy in her mind. She took her big husband with her, "to keep him," as she said, "out of

mischief;" and she stayed away much longer than she had intended to do. She was delighted with Adelonga, and with her sister's companionship.

Ned, also, while being kept in order, enjoyed himself excessively; and as long as he was "good" in the matter of his besetting sin, his lady and mistress liked him to enjoy himself. There were plenty of bush gaieties in the shape of sporting meetings and balls, and the time slipped away rapidly, as time at Adelonga usually did.

A dance at the Digbys' gave Mrs. Reade the desired opportunity for making the acquaintance of Mr. Dalrymple's people, and she learned a few facts with respect to that gentleman

which, while considerably aggravating her alarm, tended to modify and dignify the impressions of him that her mother had given her.

Lucilla showed her a fine photograph of his powerful, melancholy, high-bred face, and she was quite overcome by it.

"Oh, dear me!" she said to herself, with a sort of angry dismay, "it is no wonder that Rachel was infatuated. If *I* had had attentions from that man—little as I am given to falling in love—I think I should have been as bad as she."

When Christmas came the sisters were still at Adelonga. Lucilla could not leave home, and persuaded Beatrice not to leave her. They contented themselves with sending pretty presents

and many loving messages and excuses to their relatives in Melbourne, and plunged into a series of festive entertainments that lasted for several weeks.

Then suddenly, as she was dressing for a ball, Mrs. Reade was startled to receive a letter from her mother, begging her to return to town at once, as Rachel was very ill.

CHAPTER XII.

"THE GROUND-WHIRL OF THE PERISHED LEAVES OF HOPE."

MRS. READE lost no time in obeying her mother's summons. In two days she was back in Melbourne, and having given ten minutes to the inspection of her domestic affairs, and refreshed herself with tea and bread and butter, she went on to Toorak in the carriage that had brought her from the station,

without even waiting to change her travelling-dress.

At Toorak she found things in a most discouraging and deplorable condition—as they never would have been, she told herself, had she remained in town.

Mrs. Hardy, who met her in the hall, and took her to her own room for elaborate explanations, was herself a most puzzling and unsatisfactory feature in the case, for she made it evident to her daughter's keen perception that something more had happened than was accounted for in her rather disconnected narrative, and that she did not intend to disclose what it was.

There was a touch of nervous recklessness and defiance in the way she

spoke of Rachel's illness—as if the poor child had crowned a systematic series of misdemeanours by falling ill on purpose—and of her hearty regret that she had ever had anything to do with such a perverse and ungrateful girl, which conveyed to Mrs. Reade the impression that her cousin had in some way been persecuted, or had at any rate, been subjected to more heroic treatment than her own judgment and advice had sanctioned.

Under such circumstances it was, perhaps, natural that her mother should be somewhat reserved, since to be fully confidential would be to confess that she had made mistakes; but this sudden reversal of old habits, occurring at this important crisis in the family fortunes, was a serious

aggravation of the already sufficient difficulties that the little woman had to deal with.

What complicated her task still further was the discovery that Mr. Kingston was again a frequent visitor at the house, and a strong suspicion that he was cognisant of those unauthorised measures — whatever they were—which she was not to hear of. The only thing she could hope for was that Rachel would make a clean breast of all her secrets.

"And if she trusts me, I will stand her friend against them all," declared the baffled conspirator to herself, as she sat and listened to her mother's tangled story.

It appeared that Rachel's first signs of illness had become apparent very

soon after the Reades had left town. She began to fade in colour and to fail in appetite, and grew nervous, flighty, and restless; and, upon investigation, it was discovered that she had lost the habit of sleeping as a healthy girl should sleep at night.

The family doctor was called in, who, amongst other remedies prescribed a return to horse exercise, which, since the breaking-off of her engagement, had been abandoned; and Mr. Kingston thereupon begged so earnestly that she would ride Black Agnes again, that she reluctantly consented to do so to please him.

Mr. Kingston behaved most delicately, it was explained, and did not force himself upon her in her rides. She always went out with William.

"Always," however, turned out to be only twice, and on both occasions the carriage had accompanied her with Mr. Kingston in it.

Just before Christmas she refused to ride any more, and she behaved in the most rude and ill-bred manner to Mr. Kingston. On Christmas Day she was *very* aggravating—in what way did not appear—and Mrs. Hardy had to "speak" to her; and the result was that she flew into a violent passion, and then had a fit of hysterics, and then fainted dead away, and did not come round for nearly five minutes.

"I don't recognise Rachel in any of those performances," remarked Mrs. Reade. "Why did you not send for me then, mother?"

"Because I thought it was nothing but a temporary attack. The weather was sultry—she was full of whims and fancies. What could you have done if you had come? And she was better again next day."

"Well?"

"Well, then, when I was doing all I could to nurse and take care of her, she went out of a warm room one night, and rambled about the garden or somewhere in a heavy dew, and got her feet wet. Wasn't it *too* bad? I could have *shaken* her when I saw her come in, with a face as white as ashes, and chilled to her very bones!"

"She caught cold, I suppose?"

"Of course she did. And then she had a touch of fever—what else was

to be expected? Her pulse was very high, and she was excited, and inclined to be delirious—indeed, we had as much as we could do to manage her. It did not last long, and it was really nothing but the consequences of her imprudence, the doctor said—and there was a little low kind of fever going about just now—and he did not think her constitution was very strong. He says she will soon be all right, with care; and indeed, the fever is quite allayed since I wrote to you, and any little danger that there might have been is over. But she keeps low. She doesn't seem to gain strength—and no wonder, considering we can't get her to eat anything. I am glad you have come back; perhaps

you will have more influence with her than I have."

"I suppose I may go up?" Mrs. Reade inquired, after a pause. Her mother gave her permission readily; it was a great surprise and relief to her to find herself spared the searching cross-examination which she had rather uneasily looked forward to.

"You had better put on your bonnet and have a drive," the young lady proceeded, pausing with her hand on the door. "It will do you good, after being in the house so much. I don't want the horses taken out, and they will only scratch holes in the gravel if they stand here doing nothing. I am not going away till dinner time."

"Thank you, my dear, I think I will," said Mrs. Hardy. Mrs. Reade went upstairs to Rachel's room, and without knocking, opened the door softly.

It was a bright January afternoon, but the heat of the day was over, and a sea breeze was springing up. The window was open, and the chintz curtains softly rustling to and fro. There was a magnificent bouquet on a table at the foot of the bed; the air was full of the perfume of roses; a few flies were buzzing over a plate of strawberries set on a chair at Rachel's side.

The invalid was lying on a sofa, in a white dressing-gown, in an attitude of extreme languor, asleep. One hand holding a fan had

dropped beside her; the other was under her head. Her dark gold hair was loose and tumbled, and curling in damp rings on her temples; her face was flushed and thin; there were hollows and shadows under the tired closed eyes. She looked as if she had been ill for months.

Mrs. Reade, examining her attentively as she knelt by the sofa, was deeply shocked and concerned. Never would she have gone away to Adelonga if she could have foreseen this! And never should the poor little thing be harried and worried, as she had evidently been, again, if *she* had any power to prevent it—no, not though twenty Mr. Kingstons and all their twenty fortunes were at stake.

A mosquito settled upon the girl's white arm, and the light brush of the finger that removed it wakened her. She drew a deep breath, and opened her eyes languidly; then seeing her visitor, she stared at her for a second in a dazed and startled way; and then to Mrs. Reade's great embarrassment and distress, she suddenly flung herself into her arms, and broke into the wildest weeping.

"Now, Rachel! Now, my dearest child—"

But it would have been as hopeless to try and stop the Falls of Niagara as this tide of passion at the flood; seeing which, Mrs. Reade waited for the ebb in silence. By the time it came the girl was completely exhausted;

she seemed to have the merest fragment of strength.

"Now," said Beatrice, when she had sponged her face and hands and otherwise taken steps to revive and soothe her, "now tell me what all this is about. I know you are in some great trouble, and I have come home on purpose to help you."

"No one can help me!" Rachel cried, desparingly, tears rushing afresh into her hot eyes.

"Oh, nonsense. Just tell me what is the matter, and see if I can't. Are they trying to make you marry Mr. Kingston? Because I can soon send *him* about his business."

"No; Mr. Kingston is very kind *now*. He sends me flowers every day. He does not worry me. He is very

considerate and thoughtful. For I think he—knows."

"Well, and now I want to know. Is it about—someone else? Is it about Mr. Dalrymple?"

"Who told you?" the girl demanded, with sharp entreaty. "Oh, Beatrice, what have you heard? Did Mrs. Digby tell you anything about him? Is he in Queensland? Is he alive? What is he doing?"

Mrs. Reade replied that she had heard nothing of Mr. Dalrymple beyond the fact that he was believed to be in Queensland, and doing well.

"If he had not been, they must have known," said Rachel. "Oh, my love, if I could see you for myself just once."

She began to cry again, more bitterly

than before, and to wring her hands. There was a fierce excitement in her grief and despair that for a moment stunned the little woman who had never known what it was to be in love.

And then Rachel told all the story of her clandestine engagement, as the reader already knows it, without any reservations. The *dénouement* was exactly what Mrs. Reade expected—"And he never came!"

"Poor little thing!" she ejaculated pitifully.

"I was as certain that he would come as that Christmas would come," said Rachel, reckless in her confessions now that she had begun to open her heart. "And there *was* a strange gentleman here, and he was shut up a

long time with Aunt Elizabeth, and I thought it was he—"

"Are you sure it was not he?"

"Quite sure. When he was going away I ran out into the garden and watched for him; he was an ugly *little* man. And if it had been Roden, and he had wanted to see me, *he* would not have allowed himself to be sent away."

"That would have depended on mamma; wouldn't it?"

"Oh, no. He would never have let her send him away; and Aunt Elizabeth says, solemnly, that he never came."

"You told *her* about him then?" asked Mrs Reade.

"Beatrice, I was nearly mad—I don't know what I said. She was very angry—she always hated him. But I did not care—I was too miserable to

care. And I made her *swear* that he had never come; and now—it is nearly February—now I know he didn't. I don't want anybody to tell me."

Mrs. Reade put all these revelations into her mental crucible, and in a few seconds she had the product ready. On presenting it to Rachel, wrapped up in the gentlest language, it came to this simply—that "it was always the way with men of that kind."

"He is not like other men," said Rachel. "I do not blame him. I have thought of it, over and over and over, every night and every day, and I know why it was. I *ran after him*, Beatrice—I took him before he offered himself to me—I had only seen him once or twice when I showed him I loved him, and made him think I wanted

him—he did not ask me to be his wife until I had given myself to him already! I did not think of it then, but I see it clearly now. I dragged him into it—I gave him no choice. And now he is away, and he thinks about it, and he knows I am not enough for him. How should I be enough—*I*. for such a man as that? Oh, that happy woman, who died in his arms! Oh, how I wish I had been she!"

"Well," said Mrs. Reade, after a pause, trying to speak cheerfully, but feeling profoundly disheartened; "you ought not to have had anything to do with lovers and marriages at your time of life, and you must just give up thinking of such things until you are older and wiser."

"I shall never give *him* up," said

Rachel quietly; "never, if I live to be a hundred. I have told Aunt Elizabeth—I told her to tell Mr. Kingston—that I shall never love any other man. It would be impossible, after loving him. When I am well I shall ask her to let me go out and be a governess, and earn my own living. I don't want to be rich, I want to be poor, like him. And some day, perhaps, I may see him again, and be able to do something for him—if it isn't till he is an old, old man, I don't care. If only God lets him live and lets me live, so that we are both in the world together—I'll take my chance of the rest. But—but," and she turned her head from side to side, and began to tremble and cry in a weak, hysterical abandonment of all self-command, "if I

have to wait for years and years, without a sight of his face or a sound of his voice, how shall I be able to live? The longing for him will kill me!"

Mrs. Reade went away when her carriage returned, more humble-minded than she had been in her life. She wanted very much to stay and nurse her cousin until she was better, but she could not do that, because she could not trust Ned to keep house and keep sober by himself; so she set off to see the doctor to get a confidential report of the "case," meaning to intimate her suspicions that there was a touch of fever on the brain, and to gain his sanction to a scheme for removing the invalid to her own cheerful abode at South Yarra as soon as she became moderately convalescent.

CHAPTER XIII.

RACHEL ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARRIAGE.

PROBABLY no girl of nineteen —probably no man or woman of any age—ever died of a broken heart, unless when that complaint was complicated and aggravated by the presence of physical disease of some sort.

Rachel's constitution was sound, albeit her nervous organisation was extremely delicate, and she did not die, neither under this bitter first blow, nor later

on, when she had still sharper provocations.

A little tender petting and coddling at the hands of her cousin Beatrice, who was now her devoted ally and friend, did more to restore her than all the doctor's medicines and all her aunt's jellies and broths.

The very talking of her troubles eased and soothed her, and gave her a sense of refreshment and rest, and though Beatrice offered her no encouragement on Mr. Dalrymple's behalf—and indeed hinted pretty broadly that the terrible thing which had happened was an inevitable sequel and corrective to a lapse of reason that partook of the character of temporary insanity, to say the least of it—she was heartily if not demonstratively sympathetic.

Within a fortnight of her cousin's return she reached that stage of convalescence which made the removal to South Yarra justifiable, and in the doctor's opinion expedient.

Mrs. Reade had great difficulty in carrying out this little enterprise. Her mother had never shown herself so impracticable.

She was determined not to let Rachel out of her sight, she said; and she stuck to that determination against many artful manœuvres so steadily that the powerful small woman, little accustomed to be thwarted, and still less to own to it, nearly made up her mind to confess herself beaten, and to break the disappointment to Rachel.

Mrs. Hardy, however, relented in a

sudden and unexpected manner. She received a consignment of furniture and *bric-à-brac* from her travelling daughter, together with most interesting and bewildering advices.

Laura wrote to say that the Toorak House, if it had any respect for itself, must immediately get rid of its pier-glasses, its whitewash, and its aniline colours; and poor Mrs. Hardy, who had ever walked with the complacent dignity of a priestess and oracle in the sacred regions of household art, was too much excited and disturbed by the humiliating discovery that she was old-fashioned and behind the times, and by her agonising desire to recover her proper position, to pay the customary attention even to Rachel's business.

While she was absorbed in beginning the mighty task of re-adjusting her ideas of taste and the details of her domestic environment, which, after a few years of painful struggle with the impracticabilities of Eastlake mediævalism, was to result in the existing combination of Chippendale and the Japanesque, she felt that it would be a relief to divest herself of superfluous cares.

So she laid her daughter under solemn obligations to protect Rachel's interests and the honour of the family, and allowed her to take the invalid away with her for a week or two, that so she might give her undivided attention to the choice of new coverings for the drawing-room furniture, and the question what should be done to the ceiling.

The two young women were very grateful for the chance which set them free to follow their own devices. Mrs. Reade brought her new brougham—a propitiatory offering from Ned after he had scandalously disgraced himself by going to a public dinner and coming home in a dishevelled condition at noon next day—and conveyed her charge to South Yarra in a nest of soft cushions, and laid her on a pillowy sofa in the brightest of homely boudoirs, where they discussed the situation and afternoon tea with much content and cheerfulness.

Rachel was strangely peaceful and amiable at this time. She puzzled her companion excessively. She had, indeed, a sort of exalted transcendentalism about her that was almost aggravating to that

practical and most unsentimental person. Her way of moralising upon love and lovers, after such an experience as she had had, was very naïve and touching, but eminently preposterous, Mrs. Reade considered—and she did not at all mind saying so.

"A lover who is unfaithful does the deadliest dishonour that is possible to love, in *my* opinion," said she, with her customary air of decision. "To break *any* pledge is bad enough, but to break *that* pledge ought to disqualify a man from ever again calling himself a man."

"I do not think there should be any pledges in love, either given or asked for," said Rachel softly. "Love is not a thing to be tied and bound. Fancy a man feeling that he *had* to keep a

promise if he did not wish to do it! And, oh! fancy a woman letting him—being deceived into letting him make a sacrifice for her! It would be an outrage and a degradation to both of them. I think Roden—Mr. Dalrymple—is above that, Beatrice."

From all she had heard, Mrs. Reade was decidedly disposed to think so too.

"He says that they are a curse upon people's lives—those engagements that are kept," continued Rachel, looking solemnly out of the window with her pensive eyes.

"Did he tell you that? Dear me, he must be a most extraordinary man."

"I understand it perfectly—I know what he means. When we love one another we are not responsible; some-

thing in us makes us do it. When we leave off loving—when we get dissatisfied—we can't help it either. It is nature that tells us to do the one as well as the other; and nature should be obeyed, Roden says."

Mrs. Reade made no comment upon this, but thought to herself that it was a remarkably wise provision of nature—under the circumstances—that her devotee was endowed with the courage of his convictions.

"It is very hard for me now, but it is the truest kindness and gentleness on his part," the girl went on, with a tremor in her quiet voice. "He knows we understand each other better than any one else can do. I think some day he will come and tell me all about it—when he thinks I can bear

it; how he could not help it; that that other woman's memory was more to him than any new love a few days old could be, and how he was true to her and to himself, and to me, not to wrong any of us any further to gratify my foolishness. It will be something of that sort, I know; it will be nothing that is a disgrace to him. Ah, Beatrice, you think I am talking childish nonsense, I see it in your face."

"I certainly do, my dear. I think you are fully qualified for admission into the Yarra Bend, if you wish for the candid truth."

"No; you don't know him, and I do. I am puzzled, I don't deny that I am puzzled a little; but I *trust* him. He may do what he likes; I shall never

think that he will do anything wrong. Some day it will be explained, and I shall see that he was right. I shall love him the more for not being afraid to break off with me when he felt it was a mistake. Under any circumstances I love him too well not to be thankful I am spared the misery of seeing him suffer from a irksome marriage that could not satisfy him. And love—as he and I understand love—would be degraded by vulgar efforts to keep it under lock and key."

"I don't know whether it occurs to you," remarked Beatrice, with her head on one side; "but it is a very dangerous doctrine that you and Mr. Dalrymple seem to believe in. Logically worked out, it leads—goodness knows where it *doesn't* lead to."

The blood flew over the girl's pale face. She was the most sensitively delicate, the most maidenly, of girls; and she scented a meaning in her cousin's words that shocked her terribly.

"I am sure that cannot be," she said, with a majestic gentleness that was full of severe reproach.

"You don't imply that husbands and wives, when they are tired of each other—or even when only one is tired—are at liberty to make fresh combinations?"

"You *know* I am not alluding to married people, Beatrice. They are like nuns who have taken the veil; they have nothing to do with—with—such things as we have been speaking of."

"Oh, indeed—haven't they?"

"They are in a sacred place. They

are out of the common world—out of the arena, so to speak. They have taken their prizes, and gone to sit with the spectators. Even if they do marry wrongly, and do not love each other afterwards, in the fullest way, after such a dedication as they have made—with such ties and confidences, and intimacies between them, so sacred, and so close, and so delicate, and so —so—oh, Beatrice, don't look at me like that! You know what I mean."

"I am trying to follow you, dear."

"You are married yourself, and you know how it is—better than I do. Yet *I* know, too. If I were married—if I were Roden's wife——"

"You would lie down at his feet and let him clean his boots on you, if there did not happen to be a door-mat

handy—oh, yes, I quite understand *that*."

"I would never make demands upon him that he should love me always," the girl proceeded, with a gentle solemnity that this kind of flippant witticism could not discompose. "I would never even ask him if he loved me. It would seem to me a coarse and insulting question, and it would tempt him to doubt whether he did. If he went away from me, I would never say to him, 'Write to me often—write me long letters.' It is so stupid of people to do that! Of course, if he wanted to, he would; and if he did it because he was asked, his letters would be valueless, and worse. He should never have to think of me as a mortgage on his life and his happiness—he should do

as he liked—he should love me as he liked. And if ever he left off loving me, I should know he could not help it—I should not blame him—I should not ask him why. I should *feel* it in a moment—I am sure, long before he did—as one feels a chill in the air when the sun goes in, even if one's eyes are shut; but I should never say a word about it. And yet—"

"And yet it would never occur to him, you think, to provide himself with a more congenial companion?

"Beatrice, I cannot talk to you, if you make those suggestions."

"I am only making your own suggestions, my dear. You said it was a degradation to love to keep it under lock and key."

"And I said I was not speaking of

married people. You *know* there is something—whole worlds of things—besides love to be considered in their case."

"Married people are just as human as single people—and so, for the matter of that, are nuns who have taken the veil, I suppose. Vows, if I understand you rightly, are immoral; and the dictates of nature should be obeyed. Nature is uncommonly likely to dictate to man who is not in love with his wife that there might possibly exist a more desirable woman."

"I don't know how to explain myself," said Rachel, who felt herself in a distressing entanglement, and yet was conscious that her principles were being utterly misconstrued; "but I know that *that*—what you allude to—would be an impossibility."

"Well, I daresay it would," said Mrs. Reade, after a pause. She was suddenly struck with the impropriety of insisting upon strict logic in the discussion of these delicate matters, all things considered. Yet she was not quite content to leave off at this point.

"Put Mr. Dalrymple aside, Rachel. Suppose you were yourself married, not to him, but to someone you did not particularly care for?"

"That could never be," the girl replied quickly.

"Oh, I don't know. It was very nearly being, I may take leave to remind you. None of us can forsee what will happen, and 'never' is a ridiculous word for a child like you to use. You will not live an old maid for fifty or sixty years because you are disappointed in

a lover whom you have known for a few days—don't you believe it."

"I will make no vows," said Rachel with a faint smile; "but I express to you my sincere conviction that I shall never marry anybody. If I do—and I can't say I *wish* to be an old maid—I shall tell the person, whoever he is, all about Roden, frankly."

"Of course you will. And very probably he will like you the better for that frankness, and be quite willing to take you on your own terms. But then, suppose after years of married life Mr. Dalrymple turned up again, and you found you felt towards him as you do now—what then?"

"What then?" repeated the girl, much disturbed and a little affronted; "I should not recognise that I felt so."

"But suppose—for the sake of argument—that you could not help yourself?"

"I hope I could help it, Beatrice. I should not allow him to remind me of the past."

"Would not the past suggest itself sufficiently? Ah, my dear, he is a very strong man! And you are as weak as —well, we needn't say anything about that. If he wanted your love back, and you had it in your heart——"

"If he did," interposed Rachel; "but I know he never would—I should love him no more."

"Would that be in accordance with the terms of your philosophy?"

"Yes, it would. For nature makes us with many capacities. Some of them counteract the others. Don't talk of these things any more, Beatrice—I don't like it."

"Very well, dear; I won't."

The little lady got up from her seat on the floor, opened a window, put the teacups on the table, and asked her cousin if she had seen the beautiful Persian tiles that Mr. Kingston had just had sent out to him for one of the dados in the new house.

Rachel responded absently, gazed for a little while in silence upon the sleepy garden full of flowers and humming bees, and as Mrs. Reade had expected, returned herself to the abandoned topic.

"At any rate," she said thoughtfully, "there is one thing I would always do. I would tell the truth. I would never have secrets. I would sooner do the wrongest thing, the wickedest crime, than hide it. If I *feel* things in my heart—well, my husband, if I have one,

shall know all that I know. And I will never do anything that he—that the whole world—may not see."

"Does that seem to you so easy?" inquired Beatrice, settling a top-heavy rosebud in a slender Venetian vase. "Did you never have any secrets that you were afraid to tell?"

The girl was silent for several minutes. She was crimson to the throat, and her face was turned away from her companion.

"I will do what is sure to be right and—safe," she said at last, falteringly; "I will never marry anybody, if I do not marry Roden."

THE END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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